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HOLY WANDERINGS

# IN THE LAP OF THE HIMALAYAS

SRI RAMAKRISHNA MATH
MADRAS

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Swami Vivekananda Jayanthi
Celebrations, Jan. 1981

*Ramakrishna Mission*

*Vivekananda College*

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Quiz on "Swamiji's Life and Teachings"

.....SECOND....*Prize awarded to*

Thiru T. GANESAN

*of* II M.A. *class* Sanskrit *group*

*for Proficiency in* Quiz on "Swamiji's Life and Teachings

Date: 2.2.1981

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# *In the Lap of the Himalayas*

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# IN THE LAP OF THE HIMALAYAS

Original in Bengali

BY

SWAMI AKHANDANANDA
(A Direct Disciple of Sri Ramakrishna)

*Translation by*
Dr. Narendranath B. Patil

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## PREFACE

We had brought out some two years back a travel book by Swami Akhandananda under the name *From Holy Wanderings to Service of God in Man.* The book has gained great popularity as a revelation of the life-history of a great soul. So as a companion volume to it, we are bringing out the present one, *In the Lap of the Himalayas,* another travel book by the same author, conveying his experience of the Himalayan pilgrimages.

Swami Akhandananda, more familiarly known as Gangadhar Maharaj and as Baba, was a direct Sannyasin disciple of the Great Master Sri Ramakrishna. From 1887, a little after the Great Master's demise, till about Swami Vivekananda's return from the West in 1897, he was for almost about ten years a wandering pilgrim visiting holy places. The intrepid pilgrim that he was, he crossed the Himalayas and visited Tibet thrice besides stopping at almost all the important Himalayan pilgrim centres. From 1890 he travelled extensively in Rajputana, Gujarat, and in famine-stricken parts of West Bengal, coming into intimate touch with all ranks of society.

The Swami was a talented speaker and writer in his mother tongue Bengali. In the later days at the earnest request of admirers and disciples he had written memoirs of his travels which were partly serialised in the Basumati, a monthly magazine in Bengali, and in the Udbodhan, the Bengali organ of the Ramakrishna Order. They were published later in book form under the name *Smritikatha.* The Swami had desired that the whole or parts of his writings should be translated into English for the benefit of a wider public. Thanks to the earnest help rendered by some disciples of the Swami, we have been able to publish in 1979, important sections of it dealing with his

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travels in Rajputana, Gujarat and West Bengal, under the title *From Holy Wanderings to Service of God in Man.* The book has received very enthusiastic reception from the English reading public. For, the Swami's writings give not only informative and thrilling accounts of men, countries and events, but also the reflections of a philosopher and a lover of God, man and Nature, so that they are educative in the highest sense of the term.

The present publication, a companion volume to the earlier one, gives the Swami's experiences and reflections on the Himalayas and the great pilgrimage centres located on that holy mountain.

Swami Akhandananda commanded a beautiful diction and an inimitable literary style. The present book was translated from Bengali into Marathi in 1959 by Dr. Narendranath B. Patil, and was published by Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Nagpur. Dr. Patil has now again translated the original Bengali book into English. He is at present Joint Director of Languages, Government of Maharashtra. The spirit of the original has been kept intact and the translation retains its freshness of expression. More than 90 years have elapsed since Swami Akhandananda visited the holy Himalayas. Things have changed a great deal. Possibly the topography has also undergone much change. That will probably be an additional attraction to present-day readers, as the descriptions of this book will give them an idea of the pristine charm of those regions before human interference had begun to mar the beauties of Nature with the passing of days. Many of the places which were inaccessible then, are now reached by means of motor vehicles or planes. But it is hoped that the book will still convey some inspiration to all those who long for something sacred in this humdrum world.

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*Swami Akhandananda*

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# In the Lap of the Himalayas

## 1. RISHIKESH TO TEHRI

*Rishikesh, the Holy Gateway*

I have no aids now, other than my faint memories, to help me write down an account of my wanderings. I have to remember those receding events and put them in a cogent form. I had no idea then that I would one day be writing a book of my wanderings in the Himalayas. I have kept, therefore, no jottings of those wonderful wanderings. In fact, it was my purpose to try and forget whatever I used to see. I have taken up this writing now only at the persuasion of many of my friends. I would feel gratified if this account arouses in some one's mind a desire to visit those holy places in the Himalayas or adds to his information about those distant lands.

It was perhaps the seventh or eighth month after the Mahasamadhi of the Master, the year of the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria's accession, probably towards the end of 1887 that I first set out on a pilgrimage to Northern India from the Baranagar Math. On the way I visited Gaya, Benaras, Ayodhya and Naimisaranya and reached Haridwar. Besides these places, I halted only at Lucknow and Sitapur.

It took me about three months to reach Haridwar. I remember that I reached Haridwar before the Sankranti, the last day of Baisakh. From there I went on to Rishikesh, reaching there in about 3 to 4 days. I had fulfilled a long-standing desire and a great feeling of peace over-

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came me. There is no other place so pleasant and holy as Rishikesh in this region of the Himalayas. This is the gateway to the pilgrimage to Badrikashram. There is a motley crowd of monks and ascetics belonging to various denominations in this region, from Kartika up to Dasahara. Many rich people come here during the month of January (Magha) every year and feed the monks and engage themselves in various charitable services to them.

There is a place named Tapovana near Rishikesh. A variety of rice known as Basmati is grown in particular fields round about this village. The grain of this rice is very fine but it puffs a good deal when boiled.* The cooked rice looks snow-white and its fragrance lingers all throughout the day. The people there believe that this rice is grown in some particular fields only on account of the boon of an ancient sage. This rice is highly esteemed in those parts of the Himalayas and is sold at the rate of four seers* a rupee. I do not know whether the rates have changed during the course of these many years. Whatever it be, there is no other variety of rice which would beat this variety in aromatic excellence. The Bharata Temple is the main shrine in Rishikesh. The Raja of Tihri has made an endowment in favour of this village for the daily worship in the temple. I learnt from the abbot of this temple that they have to send some Basmati rice for the Rajas and Maharajas in the Punjab every year.

From here are seen the eternally snow-clad peaks of the Himalayas. The holy Ganga flows by cutting through huge rocks and the surrounding forests resound with its rushing waters. The Ganga turns from here to the plains to bless the people of this great land. The holy atmosphere of Uttarakhand charged every particle in my body. My heart was full of joy unspeakable. I

* Seer is an old measure equivalent to about 800 gms.

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thought to myself that the moment I had entered the Uttarakhand, my heart was filled with joy. What sublime happiness would there be awaiting me in the inner precincts of this holy land? For an aspirant, Rishikesh is almost a heaven. Even the Siddhas are moved at the recital of the greatness of Rishikesh. While at Rishikesh, I stayed in a hut of a mendicant. I came to know very intimately a few Punjabi monks. They were open-minded and large-hearted and this made my stay in Rishikesh very comfortable and pleasant. Meditation, discussion about the Self and reading of the Upanishads, these were our only pre-occupations those days. We could not think of uttering any worldly word in that extremely holy land. My stay at Rishikesh is both indescribable and unforgettable. I decided to go to Badri and Kedar via Dehradun, Mussouri, Jamnotri and Gangotri. A Punjabi monk who used to spend rather lavishly was pressing me to accompany him to Badri Narayan. He told me that it was very difficult to travel in those hilly and lonely regions, without enough money in hand. Thus he tried to deter me from undertaking this journey by saying that I had not enough money to travel in this region. He had plenty of money and he had one disciple — a Dasanami Naga. The monk had given many feasts to more than a thousand monks on a number of occasions from the month of Magh onwards. But he could not bait me and I left Rishikesh and started walking all the way to Dehradun.

### *To Mussouri*

During my visits to the holy places in the Himalayas, I was often wonderstruck with the beauty, grandeur and serenity of some of those places. A mere recollection of those days now stirs up every fibre of my being and a stream of serene and holy thoughts bubbles up within me. The memory of my visit to Badarikashram is one of them. I would like, therefore, to write something about it here.

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For the last few years a large number of Bengalees are visiting Badarikashram every year. It was quite different in those days. There were few pilgrims from Bengal, the majority being from the Punjab. The educated Bengali Sannyasins and other young tourists have written a lot in magazines about their wanderings. Their writings have made people aware of the main pilgrim spots in the Himalayas. But it is a fact that we get different views about places in the Uttarakhand from monks and pilgrims who visited these places at different times. The same places might have changed somewhat and been described differently after a period. It is also true that a place might be described very differently, depending upon the age, attitude and standing in life of the narrator. We are always, therefore, eager to hear different things about the places in the Uttarakhand. Those who went to Badarikashram years ago, via Manbhang and Chitbhang, would describe their journey in a way different from those who might have visited it recently. The pilgrims of today would, by no stretch of imagination, be able to visualise the difficulties which pilgrims of bygone days had to surmount. They had to walk up steep and slippery paths. The very names Manbhang and Chitbhang are significant. Why go so far! Even those who had gone there by some hilly track, before Haridwar became connected by rail, would not enjoy the same grandeur and scenic beauty. They will not find the rope bridges on the way to Gangotri and Badri-Kedar now. There are metalled roads and pucca bridges everywhere. So the pilgrimage to Badri-Kedar is not very difficult now. As a result, people of all ages, young and old, visit those places every year. This has affected the holy atmosphere there. Formerly we could not hear of a thief among the hill people in the Uttarakhand. Now such a situation prevails only in remote places in this area where the local people do not come in contact with the pilgrims. The behaviour and demeanour of

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these hill people change as they come in contact with the urban people of the plains. I hear that these hill people have now lost much of their innocence and kindliness.

Pilgrims who come to Badrikashram by the metalled road and return after paying their homage to the deity, remain almost ignorant of the beauty and grandeur of the Himalayas. They cannot get an idea of the serenity, quietude and the happy and pleasant atmosphere of this divine region. Those who think of staying for a few days at this place, and try to discover the inner secrets of this land, can occasionally get glimpses of such inner precincts.

### *Vow of Keeping no Money*

On my way to Dehradun from Rishikesh, a monk advised me to get a pair of shoes, before entering the Uttarakhand. After leaving Rishikesh, I reached Dehradun within a couple of days. On the way, I purchased a pair of shoes in a village. I rested for two days at Dehradun and then reached Rajpur — a place about 12 miles from Dehradun. This village is at the foot of the Mussouri hills. I had a few annas with me when I came to Rajpur. I spent them here and washed my hands clean of money. I decided here to finish the pilgrimage of the Uttarakhand without keeping any money or provisions with me. I said to myself — "Don't keep any company, don't travel with either monk or householder, nor ask for any alms unless extremely hungry and don't keep anything in store for the next meal. Surrender yourself to the Lord and complete the pilgrimage to the Uttarakhand." I left Rajpur and then began to climb up the ascending path to Mussouri. On my arrival at Mussouri, I found the bungalows of Europeans everywhere. There was however a Siva Temple in the

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Landour market. Sannyasins and holy men could stay there for a day or so. One Lingayat Jangam* monk was the manager of this temple. I could not pass the night here comfortably. But where else could I go? If I stood in the market and looked about, I would see only the white sahibs everywhere. The Jangam Sadhu received me very hospitably in the temple. My clothing consisted of a woollen kafni and a piece of woollen cloth. Seeing that I had not enough clothing for the pilgrimage in the Uttarakhand, and that I had no money either, the temple manager wanted to take me to a rich merchant who would give me a blanket and a rupee. He told me so. This rich merchant gave a rupee and a blanket to all those monks who passed through Mussouri. The Lingayat monk pressed me to accompany him to the merchant and accept the gifts. He said that the distance from Mussouri to Tihri was about 30 miles. There were only 3 to 4 shops on the way and there was no village or any other human habitation. The shopkeepers would not give anything free of cost. Nor would I be able to bear the pangs of hunger on the way. When I told him that I had decided not to touch money during my pilgrimage, he was much moved. He wished me well and prayed that I might not suffer on the way. Why was this Lingayat monk so sympathetic to me? Possibly because of my tender age. I, however, took from him a staff useful for climbing the hills.

### *Majesty of the Himalayas*

I was thus not deterred by the difficulties mentioned by the monk. I left Mussouri with the pleasant thought that I was nearing my destination and commenced my journey to Tihri in good spirits. I covered about 6 to 7

* Lingayat Jangam — worshipper of the Siva Linga and a wanderer. They are mostly from Karnataka.

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miles. There was one small shop. The shop-keeper greeted me and took me cordially inside the house. He was very hospitable and provided a generous meal for me. I was upon the road again and had covered a few more miles. Then I turned my eyes to the North and what a magnificent sight it was! The Himalayas, 'the measuring rod of the earth'*, appeared before me in all their snow-white grandeur. My feet refused to move and I sat down there for a while. My eyes began to feast on the glory of the Himalayas, the entire range of which was covered with never-melting snow. A thrill ran through my body. My joy knew no bounds now. I said to myself, "Look, this is the Himalayas. The Master used to tell every one to have a glimpse of this celestial mountain. "Giriraj Sringe, Mahadev Sange." (At the top of the king of mountains, in the presence of the God of Gods.) Nature in the form of Parvati meets Shiva here. This is the home of the father of Mother Uma. Yes. This is the place I cherished to visit. I never thought that I would be so overwhelmed at the first sight of the Himalayas. I felt I had verily left the mortal world so far below that I had arrived in the heavenly kingdom itself. I was getting impatient to enter into this heavenly abode. There was silence, a serene silence, everywhere. The snow-clad ranges were surrounded with deep forests. I was overwhelmed by the sublime feelings that arose in me at this magnificent sight of the Lord's creation. My mind became peaceful and calm. I began to bow again and again at the feet of the lofty mountain — the incarnation of greatness and divine glory. I almost forgot every thing mundane and covered a distance of about 20 miles almost in a trance. I did not feel any fatigue. I came across one or two solitary travellers. On the way there were trees which had bunches of red flowers. The travellers used to pluck them and suck the honey and

* Cf. Kalidasa's Kumarasambhava: Canto 1. Verse 1.

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then chew the petals. I learnt later that these flowers were called boras. These trees grow above a certain height on the Himalayan range. The tree is fairly big and the bark is covered with velvety moss. Every bunch contains a good many flowers and they are as red as hibiscus flowers. The flower contains honey. The hill folk prepare delicious chutney of these flowers. It tastes nice when eaten with roti or bread. I ate a roti for the first time with this chutney here. I said to myself, "Oh! What a delicious offer of the Himalayas on the first day of my journey! All things in this realm are of superior excellence!"

### *Kindness of the Poor*

I had covered about 20 miles from Mussouri. I saw a shop on the rocky mountain opposite to me. As I approached the shop, I saw an elderly woman sitting outside the shop. I went a little further and sat down for a little rest there. The hard uphill walk in these hilly regions and the cool Himalayan breeze had given me a ravenous hunger. The elderly woman came to me and made enquiries. When she learnt that I had had no food, she asked me to wait there and went inside the shop. She returned after a while with hot rotis and chutney of boras flowers. I was a bit surprised at her hospitality. I recollected the temple manager saying that hospitality was very scarce in this region. Then what was this? While I was eating the roti, the woman asked me whether I had parents and why I had taken Sannyasa at such a tender age. I answered her questions as far as I could. She now saw that her husband was returning home with a bundle of firewood on his head. I noticed signs of fear on her face. She said to me, "Look, my husband is very cruel and stingy. He does not give anything to a hungry traveller or monk. While he sits in the shop, I can't give anything to anybody, however much I may

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wish. So if he asks you who has given you these rotis, tell him that you have paid for the flour and that I have only baked them. If he comes to know that I have given the rotis free, he will be annoyed with me." So saying, she left the place. Hearing her say all this, I started bolting down the rest of the rotis. I thought that I had better eat them up before he should ask me about them. If he asked, I would be in a fix. I did not want that the woman who fed me, as lovingly as a mother, should be insulted by her husband on that account. Nor did I want to tell a lie. When he came he did not notice me, possibly on account of the heavy burden on the head. He entered the shop and did not come out for a long time. I finished my meal and left the place, thinking of the kindness of the woman and her motherly concern.

### *Tehri*

In this way, I came to Tehri. I had no problem of food on the way. I reached Tehri within three days after leaving Mussouri. Tehri is the capital of the Garhwal State. The Western Garhwal district was a princely State while the Eastern Garhwal was a British district. The Rajas of Tehri are Kshatriyas. The then ruling prince Kirtisahaya was a minor. When I reached Tehri, I was kept in police custody for a few days. I don't know why. The shoes I purchased on my way to Dehradun gave me a lot of trouble. I had blisters on both the feet. It took about 10 days to heal these wounds at the State dispensary. The Rajas of Tehri had the paramount power over the entire Garhwal district in those days. Srinagar, which is in British India now, was the capital of Garhwal formerly. The ruins of the large stone palace bear testimony to this. After the British annexed the district, the Raja founded his capital in Tehri on the banks of the Bhagirathi. There is no other town as prosperous as Tehri in the state of Garhwal.

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There are a number of temples in this town built by earlier princes. It has a large population of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas and its market suffices for the entire population of the State.

While leaving Tehri, a man from the princely family advised me to have another pair of shoes made, as further on the place would be infested with leeches. I had had enough of trouble with my previous pair of shoes. So this time I treated the shoes with oil and turmeric. But to no purpose, for I could not use them. So I gave up using shoes till I reached Tibet after completing the pilgrimage in Uttarakhand. It is indeed very difficult to walk barefoot in the cold regions of the Himalayas. It is also equally difficult to walk with shoes on, on the slippery paths covered with heaps of dry leaves. Walking barefoot in this region one would at the most have his feet frost-bitten, but if one slipped down a hill side, there was no hope of being seen again. I survived two such perilous falls. It is always safe when walking on such slippery paths to secure a foothold with the toes in the ground.

## 2. JAMNOTRI

I left Tehri and walked on for 36 miles by a metalled road to Gangotri. I arrived at Dharasu, a small village of Kanphate Sadhus.* A short-cut leads to Jamnotri from here. But a lone traveller who does not know this way should never risk this journey. The way is through a deep forest with not a human soul to be seen on the way. The surrounding forest is very thick and if one loses his way, there would be none to set him on the right path.

* Kan phate=Broken ear — The Sadhus of this denomination have torn their ears.

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I was thinking how I should negotiate this short-cut in the next stage of my journey. I reached Dharasu at mid-day. I saw a party of ten hillmen resting. They had long round caps on their heads. I learnt that they hailed from Jamdagnyaji Makam — a village on the Jamnotri plateau. They had been to Dehradun for their purchases and were now returning home. Hearing this I felt much relieved. I had thought that I would not be able to go by this short-cut without some company. But God is great. His succour comes through unknown ways. If God decides to help his devotee, who would stand in his way! It was His will that I should find good company on this difficult journey through this forest. Those hillmen were also happy to know that I was going to Jamnotri.

The costumes of the people on the Jamnotri plateau are very similar to those of Rampur Besahari*. They have the same high round woollen caps, shoes of plaited fibre and long coats. The people of eastern Garhwal have altogether different garments. Jamdagnyaji Makam is a two days' journey from Dharasu. There is not a single village on the way. The travellers spend the nights round camp fires. There were heaps of ashes on the way as remnants of such camp-fires. There were big logs of pine on the way where we spent the night. There are pine forests on the slopes of the mountains where the climate is a bit warm. These trees are like suru trees. My co-travellers collected a few logs of pine and set them on fire. Soon it turned into a big blaze. We baked our rotis on the fire. The flour was of kodo**. The men consumed two big rotis each and

* The northern part of Simla range is known as Rampur Besahari. This region of Jamnotri and the part of Rampur Besahari is in Western Garhwal. So the costumes of these people are similar.

** Kodo is a corn of the millet group, coarse and not so tasty.

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then they took off their clothes and began to remove the lice in the blazing light of the bonfire. In this cool region, the lice infest almost all unwashed clothes and thrive on the warm blood of the wearer.

### *Lice & Inhospitable Villagers*

Lice are a worse pest than mosquitoes, gnats and cockroaches. They stick on to the clothes and live on blood. Our bonfire was so bright that no wild animal would think of visiting us. So the night passed undisturbed. We reached Jamdagnyaji Makam next day evening. The village is on the bank of the Jumna. I noticed that there were a number of idols of ancient deities in a temple in the village. I spent a couple of days here and left for Jamnotri on the third day.

The way to Jamnotri runs beside the Jamuna. On the next day of leaving from Jamdagnyaji Makam, I met on the way a Dasanami Naga Sanyasin and a Vaishnava Sadhu. Both of them had come there from Jammu by a hilly track and after visiting Jamnotri, they were to go to Badrinarayan. We were very happy to have met here together. I could not think of proceeding farther all alone, leaving this God-sent company of holy men. We, therefore, travelled together up to Jamnotri.

Jamnotri is in the Ramauli Pargana of district Garhwal. The people here are utterly inhospitable. We would start out on our journey before sunrise and walk continuously up to midday, have our food and after a while start off again, to halt at any village on the way to pass the night. The road closely followed the course of the Jamuna. On the way, we had to climb a big mountain and the path led us again to the river. I stopped counting the upward and downward climbs on the way. I could see many pedestrians on the way but they were all local people. There is no arrangement of any sort,

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for pilgrims going to Jamnotri. Langwa and Kapra vegetables are abundantly found on the banks of the river. We used to pluck enough of them and at midday, our friend, the Vaishnava monk used to go for Bhiksha to a near-by village. He would cook the vegetables in his water pot with the grains of Zangora and Shamaka. As we would be very hungry, we heartily ate this simple meal. In this region every village has a rest-house. We used to take shelter there.

I do not know whether everyone has had to experience the same difficult situations as was our lot. We could not gather enough alms for the three of us in spite of collecting from door to door. If a traveller sits in a rest-house the whole day, he would die of hunger, for nobody would care to enquire whether he had had any food. He must go out and shout at each door, "Give me alms! Give me alms!" Not that all the inhabitants in Garhwal are stone-hearted. Those in the eastern Pargana of Dasauli are in that way comparatively more hospitable, particularly those in the vicinity of Badrinarayan. There is a saying in Hindi, "Garhwali sarikha data nahi, Laththa bagair deta nahi", which means, the Garhwalis are generous enough but only when threatened.

After some years I had an occasion to visit Garhwal again. I shall here narrate, as far as I can, an incident I remember. Three of us — Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda), Saradananda and myself were on our way from Tehri to Srinagar. At nightfall we took shelter in a village rest-house. I humbly requested the villagers for a few faggots and a fire. But no one heeded me. I approached everyone in the village but got no response. I then remembered this saying. So the three of us stood in a square in the village and shouted loudly — "Bring us fire, bring us wood". This had its effect. Everyone brought something. Some men brought fire, some brought fire-

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wood, others brought rotis, some milk and some vegetables. They offered all these things to us and stood around us humbly with folded hands. Thereafter, it was not necessary to tell them what we needed. They were different men altogether now, as it were, quite unlike those whom I had humbly requested earlier. They looked frightened and I thought, had we shouted any more, they would have run away leaving their huts and houses open for us.

### *Poison Fly*

The hill people here were suffering from mumps. I do not know the reason for this as I had not seen this disease elsewhere. While narrating such incidents I might mention the poisonous fly. It is seen everywhere in the Himalayas, but it was only here that I had the pleasure of its painful sting.

This is a small fly, bluish in colour and of the shape of a mosquito. But it has no long needle-like proboscis. Its legs are also not similar to those of the mosquito. A tiny drop of blood comes out when it stings and there is a slight pain, almost negligible. But after some time it begins to itch. If one scratches it, a painful swelling follows as in the case of smallpox vaccination. Nobody had cautioned me about this fly. When I was first stung by this fly, I could not keep myself from scratching and next day there were big boils. It was all very painful. When I showed the boils to my companions, they told me about the fly. They stopped me from scratching and advised me to use dry cow-dung to relieve the discomfort. Oh, what a poisonous sting this small creature has! It injects its poison in a second. One of my brother monks was hospitalised for many days from the sting of this fly.

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So much for this fly. Let me now turn to the main stream of my narration. After two or three days I realised that, but for the company of these monks, I would have suffered miserably for want of food. I would not have been able to get even boiled vegetables. I had only a water-pot with me, made of coconut shell. But both of my companions had their bags filled with flour, pulses, salt, chillies, waterpots, glasses, bowls, pans, plates, ladles, tablespoons, paper, pencils, inkpot, penholders. They carried enough money also with them.

I had no idea that I would need money on the way to Jamnotri. One sees large numbers of pilgrims on the way to Kedar, Badrinarayan and Gangotri every year. Not so, on the way to Jamnotri. There is no arrangement for worship at Jamnotri. The way too, is one of much hardship throughout. We three were the only pilgrims to Jamnotri. Only at the last village are the Pandas of Jamnotri to be seen. From here the road is very steep and tortuous. A stranger would find it almost impossible to reach Jamnotri without the aid of a Panda. So we engaged Pandas from Khasali as our guides. The Pandas were too conscious of their fees and would not accompany us until we paid them a few annas in advance. I had already washed my hands off money when I left Rajpur. Had I come here alone, I don't think any Panda would have accompanied me to Jamnotri without a fee.

### *Mountain of Gold*

It was here, that I first saw the golden form of the Himalayas. The snows looked golden yellow in the rays of the sinking sun. The Himalayas, which are always clad in spotless white was now clothed in molten gold. I was stupefied to see such grandeur. I thought

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to myself, "What a wonderful image is this! Bright yellow and white almost like the Champak flower! Whose image can this be?" Himagiri, mountain of snow, appeared like Hemagiri, a mountain of gold. I have no words to describe its glorious beauty. Half the mountain was as white as camphor or silver, and the other half was as bright as gold. I thought that this must be the union of Siva and Parvati.

### *The Living Siva-Parvati*

It is only here in the Himalayas that one can see the indescribable union of Hara and Gauri. I looked at the beautiful sight and thought that Himalaya, the father of Uma, had forgotten the pain of separation from his daughter. He was now merged in the form of Siva by constantly meditating on the Haragauri form of Ardhanariswara.

Here was to be seen the serene beauty of the Universal Mother as well as the terrible aspect of Siva ready, as it were, to bring about the dissolution of the world! Here was the land of Nara and Narayana, the land worshipped by sages, the holy land known as Badrikashram, in the vicinity of Alakananda; the land purified by the holy abodes of innumerable sages, siddhas, charanas, yaksas, kinnaras and gandharvas. Here stretched vast ranges of trees almost divine, their boughs drooping with sweet fruits and fragrant flowers and the Soma creeper whose sap gave new life to dying men and women, and which was resonant with the songs of varieties of colourful birds. Here roamed the musk deer amidst pools and lakes of almost celestial beauty, whose crystal waters were made fragrant with falling blossoms of numerous flowering trees. I thought that this verily was the abode of beauty, peace and happiness, where the Universal Mother Gauri was blessing all creatures in the world.

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Again it occurred to me that this verily was the form of Rudra; these precipitous rocky heights covered with snow, whence come cascading down rock-smashing streams to form below crystal clear lakes deep as the nether world itself, and overhanging rocky cliff with cavernous ravines confronting one, all were verily the forms of Siva spread far and wide in a thousand distinctive shapes as they rose into the clouds. It was as if Siva were about to begin his world-shaking dance.

Who could be so insensible as to be unaware that a visit to the Himalayas was in fact a visit to the celestial home of Parvati and Siva, and that they verily fulfil the desires of their devotees by appearing as if in living form before them? Nowhere have I come across such an overpowering spectacle as the great Himalayas. So alluring and awe-inspiring are they!

What bliss I felt as I gazed on such dissimilarities in Uma and Mahesh!

### *Jamnotri*

I need not try any further to describe my joy. Those among the readers who have never visited the Himalayas so far, should do so once at least in their life time to make their mundane existence meaningful. For the present, let the reader accompany me now to the village near Jamnotri.

The path to Jamnotri becomes more rugged and difficult after leaving this village. There is a place called Bhairavaghati on the way from which we have to negotiate a steep ascent by taking hold of the trunks and branches of the birch trees there. This is a very precipitous path over which hang snow-covered cliffs. The Jamuna makes its descent from these mountain cliffs and runs down to the wide plains of Brindavan far below to enhance the charm of Krishna's activities over there. There is a big

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temple at Jamnotri and there are two idols of Jamuna. One is of silver and the other of stone. There is a hot water spring and an underground cave, quite warm and cosy. I have seen a number of hot water springs with sulphurous water in the Himalayas. But this particular spring is exceptionally good. There is one more such spring that I had heard of, in Manikarnika over Kangra.

We cooked beside the hot spring — rice, roti and dal — and had a good meal. The Pandas returned after leaving us there. We three spent the night in the warm underground cave. Outside blew cold winds. Next day we left the place and returned to the village where the Pandas lived. In my wanderings in the Uttarakhand I spent about seven days with these two monks. Thereafter, we returned from Jamnotri and they left for Gangotri via Uparikot, while I reached Uttarkasi via Jamadagni Makam by the path which went along the Ganga.

## 3. GANGOTRI

### *Uttarakasi*

It is a couple of days, journey to Uttarkasi from Jamadagni Makam. The way is infested with bears. Even the hill people avoid travelling singly by this path. There was a small village on the way. The people here did not know what thieving was. None had locks to their houses or boxes. I had to walk for a couple of days through the deep forest. It was my good luck that I did not come across any wild animal.

Long ago in early childhood, I had read the story of a bear and two travellers. What I heard about bears from the hill people corroborated the story. The hill people told me that if while walking through a forest, a

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bear confronts you, then you should simply cover your face with a piece of cloth and lie down motionless. Then you need not expect any trouble from the bear. The bear usually strikes its paw on a victim's face and tears his eyes. So one must protect one's face and should fall down motionless. Then the bear won't harm him. Anyway I kept in mind this ruse in case I met a bear. A man from Jamadagni Makam also accompanied me for a day.

Uttarkasi is called 'Barhat' by the hill people. The Ganga flows here northwards. There is a temple of Viswanath of Kasi and there are many other temples. The place, therefore, reminds one of Varanasi. It looks as if Lord Viswanath has come to this hilly region to lose himself in Tapasya. I left Uttarkasi and reached Bhatawari after covering a distance of about 19 miles in a day. On the way I saw a few Maharashtrian pilgrims. They offered me something to eat. At midday, I ate a little and after resting a while, I resumed my journey. I continued walking all that day.

### *The helpless Sannyasi*

The sun had now almost reached the western horizon. The village Bhatawari was still about a mile ahead. On the way, I saw a Sannyasi lying on the ground covered with an ochre cloth. It was drizzling. I asked him why he was lying there even though the village was so near. He replied that he was ill and was too weak to carry his bundle. Nor could he walk any further. In this helpless condition, he just lay there on the ground. I could not think of going any further leaving him in that helpless condition at that lonely spot. But how to take him over to Bhatawari! His luggage was a full one man's load. If there was anyone to carry the load, I would have supported him and with difficulty

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reached the village. I was standing helplessly, when I saw a Brahmachari pilgrim hastening to the village. I approached this god-sent Brahmachari and told him the plight of the Sannyasi. Without speaking a single word, he just lifted the bundle and set off for Bhatawari. I helped the Sannyasi to stand on his feet. He was a big, tall man almost double my height. I gave him my bamboo stick to lean on and putting my arm round his waist, we advanced step by step. The path was rather narrow and on one side down below the steep scarp, the current of the Ganga was quite strong. After going some distance, the Sannyasi fainted and collapsed. It was a very narrow escape. Both of us would have rolled down five thousand feet below and would have been carried to the ocean along with the Ganga waters. The Sannyasi was shivering with fear and said that it was now impossible for him to move a bit further. I also knew that it was well nigh impossible for him to walk to the village. I, therefore, made for the village Bhatawari and told the villagers the plight of the Sannyasi. The night was advancing and in spite of my entreaties, none agreed to accompany me. At last a man named Biju agreed to come and demanded four annas. I agreed.

Seeing him come with me bare-handed, I asked him to bring a kandi. It is a big basket which one can fasten on the back and carry any big load. The hill people carry heavy loads in them. Biju was unwilling to procure a kandi. He said he would carry the Sannyasi on his back. We reached the spot. The huge Sannyasi was still helplessly lying there. Biju picked him up and put him on his back. The Sannyasi's long legs dragged along the path. This was very painful and I thought that he would not survive, if carried this way. Biju also was now sure that it was an impossible task to carry the Sannyasi on the back. So leaving the Sannyasi there, we again came to the village in search of a kandi. Some pilgrims had brought big tins of Ganga water from

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Gangotri in these baskets. We asked them to give us one of them for sometime. But they were reluctant, possibly thinking that we would cheat them. In such places of pilgrimage, people are always afraid of being cheated and none would oblige you at an odd hour of the night. Only after I pawned my blanket to them, did they gave us a kandi. We were able to carry the Sannyasi to the village. The night was already far advanced. But it was a starry night and there was sufficient moon light. Thus climbing up and down that road we completed our journey.

*No room for the sick*

On reaching the village, another problem confronted us. On the outskirts of the village, there is a water wheel, a rest house, a deserted palace of the Raja of Tehri and a few rooms for pilgrims. The sick Sannyasi could not be kept out in the open during that cold night. I tried to find a place for him to rest. All the rooms for pilgrims were occupied. Biju said, "Let us take the Sannyasi to the rest-house (Dharmashala)." So we went there. I found the place too crowded. They shouted to us from within, "Get away, get away". It was all dark inside. I could not see who were there. After sometime I came to know that a band of Vaishnava Naga Sadhus had occupied the rest-house. The rooms were overcrowded. I stood in the doorway and requested the Sadhus to accommodate the sick Sannyasi. But they would not listen. All my entreaties fell on deaf ears. To make of matters worse they began to call us names and were bent on driving us away. Biju also was eager to be relieved of his burden. I was in an awkward position. But I was determined to find some room for the sick Sannyasi. Without losing my temper, I pleaded for him and requested them very firmly to take him in.

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But to no purpose. They did not budge. At last seeing that I was bent on keeping the Sadhu in the room, about seventeen robust Naga Sadhus rushed out of the room, cursing me and fixing their red eyes fiercely on me. I wondered as to why they were so cross with me. They vacated the room for me in disgust. In fact, they could have very easily accommodated one sick person in the room. When they vacated the room, I helped Biju to set down the sick Sannyasi and took him to a corner of the room. I then felt greatly relieved. It was about 10 o'clock at night. I then returned the kandi and took back my blanket. I asked Biju to see me the next day.

### *He is a Paramahamsa*

The Naga Sadhus slept in the verandah which ran on all the four sides of the rest-house. I also slept under a tree close by. Next day, when I woke up I saw that some Naga Sadhus were gazing at me with wonder. Some of them were going in and were having a look at the sick Sannyasi. They were looking at me in astonishment. One of them said, "Are yah to Paramahamsa hai. Nahi to itni gali galouj kyonkar saha sakte." (Oh God! He is a Paramahamsa. Otherwise how could he be so calm when we cursed him so much?) Then a few of them came to me and expressed regret for what happened during the night. I did not say anything. I went into the room and had a look at the patient. He was much better now. I collected a few chips of wood and lit a dhuni before him. Then he took out some flour from his bundle and asked me to bake some bread. I began to cook. In the course of conversation, I learnt that the Sadhu hailed from Marwar. He had been on pilgrimage to Badri and Kedar. He was suffering from piles and had taken ill on the way. Somebody had stolen his money also.

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*The Miserly monk*

Biju arrived while I was talking with the monk. He asked the monk to give him four annas as wages for the previous day's labour. The monk showed annoyance and said he had no money and would not be able to give him a pie. But the monk had enough of belongings — utensils, clothing and other odds and ends. Had he offered any of these things, Biju would have been more than satisfied. He even said so to the Sadhu. But the latter was adamant. He became cross with Biju and at last even scolded me for having made Biju carry him the day before. I feared his rising temper would aggravate his illness and so I asked Biju to go. I told him that I would pay him something later. He went away.

After baking a few rotis, I fed the monk. Then after taking bath, I went to the village for alms. The villagers were very kind to me that day. Hearing me, one of them paid two annas to Biju and another person promised to pay two annas later and thus absolve me from the payment.

*The way of all flesh*

When I returned from the village to the Dharmasala, I found that the monk was about to breathe his last. His throat was choked with phlegm, and swarms of flies were hovering round his gaping mouth. Before I left him I had no idea that he would breathe his last so soon. I shouted loudly but he was now beyond recall. Who would listen now! A few hours before, this very man was clinging fast to his belongings. He had not only no sense of gratitude but also was cursing his benefactor. He was not ashamed of insulting one who had brought him to a safe and comfortable place. His body which reacted suddenly to a single fly moving around him — the body receptacle of his ego — was now at the mercy of swarms

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of flies. The goods he clung to, were now to be confiscated. While I was at the village, an officer (patwari) of the King of Tehri had come there and listed all his belongings and had taken the list to the Collector's office. At that last moment I put some Ganges water in his mouth and chanted the Lord's names in his ears and thus he expired. After sometime, hearing about the death, the patwari came again and collected all his belongings. To my surprise, I found that there was a two anna bit among those things. I asked the patwari to give it to me and handed it over to Biju, thus freeing myself from the promise I made to him. It was no easy matter now for me to remove the dead body. I felt sad. No Brahmin or Rajput in the village would perform the last rites of the monk. There being no other alternative, the dead body was finally thrown into the Ganga with the help of two men. This is an easy way of performing the last rites in that hilly area. I lost two or three days at Bhatwari on this account.

### *Trance at Gangotri*

I left Bhatwari and reached Gangotri after four days. The last village on the way to Gangotri was Dharasu. Gangotri is about 25 miles from this place. After covering half the distance, I came to Bhairava Zola. Pilgrims to Gangotri offer worship here before proceeding further. There is no human habitation, Chatti or shop except this small temple on the way. After reaching Bhairava Ghati, I lost my way. Here another stream, the Bhot-Ganga, meets the main stream of the Ganga. I wandered a little, but then I again came on the main route after sometime.

As I proceeded along the road to Gangotri, the grandeur of the Himalayas began to unfold before my eyes. The huge mountain range shaped like a tortoise,

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all white with snow rose before me. It is from this mountain that the Bhagirathi was running down with sharp bends and with her gurgling waters, as if chanting "Hara, Hara". At Gangotri, the stream of the Ganga is rather narrow but with enough force to carry away Indra's hundred white elephants. The white waters of the Ganga rush with such rapidity and force, perhaps to sanctify the innumerable Jivas on this mundane plane. The river Bhagirathi runs between high mountains whose upper slopes are white with snow. Below the snow-clad tops grow the tall pines. On either side of the stream are white rocks, smooth as marble, piled one upon another like a 'Vedic altar'. This panoramic view was so picturesque that I wholly abandoned myself to it and felt I was no more on this earth. I moved from rock to rock, sitting now here, now there, as I thought I would never see such a sight again. I took in as much of that divine Himalayan beauty and quietude as my eyes and senses could absorb, till my heart was full.

I did not know that the day had almost passed. I could not think of leaving that place. A monk found me in this trance-like state and somehow managed to wake me up and take me with him to Gangotri. I had met him before near Bhairava Zola. He had baked some rotis on the way and fed me. We reached Gangotri after sunset. There is a beautiful image of Mother Ganga cast in metal. I felt very happy. There is a stone temple of Mother Ganga at Gangotri and a few houses belonging to the priests where pilgrims can stay. One or two shops provided their bare necessities. A monk lived in a cave near the bathing Ghat. He would go round Dharari and a few other places collecting alms to feed the pilgrims and sannyasins. There was no alms-house then at Gangotri. Had the monk not catered to the needs of the pilgrims, it would not have been possible for a person like me to stay at Gangotri, even for a day.

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*Gomukhi*

The original Gangotri, or Gomukhi, is about 40 kilometres from here. The mountain sides between which the river flows are so rugged, that nobody has climbed them so far. I heard that a European traveller had tried, but did not come back. Perhaps he died on the way up. Many other English mountaineers too, have tried to scale these ranges but none had succeeded. I could at most climb about a mile. The sides are very steep and moreover, when snow melts they become slippery. For this reason from very ancient times the sacred bath in Gangotri is taken at this spot. Bhagavan Sankaracharya also performed his ablutions here and consecrated a temple. The rock on which the pilgrims perform their ablutions is known as Bhagiratha Sila. I saw a very beautiful Lingam made of crystal. The priests always keep it covered under a copper pot. The number of pilgrims is very small compared with the numbers at Badrinath or Kedarnath. Pilgrims from Maharashtra are in greater number. Most pilgrims return after a night's halt at this place. The Mother Ganga is worshipped here only for six months in the year, and pilgrims throng here only for these six months. There is no good arrangement for worship and distribution of food offerings to pilgrims. The monks get only a tiny portion in the afternoon and that also not for more than two days.

*The Brahmin in the cave*

I wandered along the banks of the Ganga. While going towards Gomukhi, I noticed a cave at a distance. It was quite spacious. It was made habitable by placing wooden planks on two sides. There were two doors and a small cave behind the main one. A Brahmin from Moradabad district was occupying the main cave. He was performing Gayatri Japam there, for the last few

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days. I occupied the small cave with his permission. In a day or two we became very friendly with each other. I learnt from him that he had not left the cave for the last two days and none had cared about him. I was also rather concerned to hear that he was starving for the last two days. So I returned to the Gangotri temple to take with me something for the Brahmin to eat. Blessed be the Lord! When I reached Gangotri, I saw that a rich man from Delhi was giving a feast of halwa and puri for the monks and Brahmins. All the Brahmins and monks and Sannyasins had a hearty meal that day. But none remembered the Brahmin in the cave. I told the rich man about the Brahmin. He immediately accompanied me to have a darshan of the Brahmin ascetic. He gave us rice, flour, jaggery and ghee enough for 8 to 10 days.

The Brahmin soon satisfied his hunger. He had already developed a love for me. I made him eat the sweet rice and chapatis. A fire was kept blazing in the cave with logs of wood. The fire burns continuously throughout the night with a few pieces of this wood which yields resin and turpentine. The forest here abounds in these coniferous trees. Its wood serves the purpose of a lamp as well as a torch in these parts. Life in this cold region would be very difficult without these trees. But God has bountifully provided the people with this firewood.

### *Gods in Hibernation*

Kedar, Badri and Gangotri are at the extreme north of the Himalayas. These places are peopled for about six months of the year. The Deity is uncovered after 'Akshayatritiya' and it is towards the end of Baisakha that the worship starts and the temple is thrown open to pilgrims. It is in the beginning of Margasirsha that the shrine is covered again and all activities end. It begins

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to snow by this time and the place becomes almost inaccessible. So pilgrims stop. It is said that during this period, the pilgrimage of the Devas is on. The Devas come and worship the deities. During the previous year, a Brahmachari wanted to stay on after the deity was covered. To facilitate his stay for tapasya, a gentleman from Dharari, had made his cave habitable. He also stored a box full of provisions for a six months' stay. But it turned out that the Brahmachari was not firm enough. He stayed for a few days and as the temperature came down, and the cold increased, the Brahmachari gave up his resolve even though the cave was made comfortable for him.

After a week, I resumed my journey from Gangotri. When leaving Tehri, I had brought an empty bottle for carrying Ganges water. I filled it up here. The Brahmin hermit had by now become so attached to me that he thought of accompanying me, after his proposed Purascharana. I dissuaded him as I desired to complete the pilgrimage of Uttarakhand alone. But the Brahmin hermit would not listen. After leaving Gangotri we stayed together for a day at Dharari. My desire to travel alone was so strong that I severed with some difficulty, the delicate ties of affection that had meanwhile grown between myself and this sincere Brahmin and started alone for Uttarkasi with a view to reach Kedarnath.

### *The Satvic fetter*

I left the Brahmin in Dharari, but I could not forget all at once this simple and loving Brahmin. Thoughts of him were uppermost in my mind. When I parted from him, he was so overwhelmed that he could not utter a word. His eyes were moist with tears and he kept looking at me. I too, was greatly affected and for a moment I thought to myself, why not let him come with

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me. But I checked myself. If I yielded to such feelings, I thought it would not be possible for me to continue my journey, free and all alone, as I had planned. I, therefore, set aside such thoughts and started on my downward journey from Gangotri.

## 4. CHANDRAVADANA

### *The detour*

There are two paths leading to Kedarnath from Gangotri. One goes via Bhatwari, Buda Kedar and Trijugi Narayana, and the other goes via Uttarkasi. Pilgrims, who visit Gangotri may follow any of these two paths. I also would have gone by the same well trodden path, but I returned to Tehri for some special reason. Before setting out for Gangotri, I had heard in Tehri, that in between Tehri and Deoprayag, in the deep forest, there is a beautiful temple of the Goddess Chandravadani, crowning a steep hill. This place is one among the fifty-two sacred places ascribed to Dakshayani Sati. I was eager to visit this place from the moment I heard of it. If by chance, I did not return to this area after my visit to Badri-Narayan and Kedarnath, I would never have seen this temple. So I returned to Tehri and then went on to Kedarnath and Badri-Narayan by a longer route. It is true I could have completed in half that time my visit to Badri-Narayan, had I proceeded straight on from Bhatwari. But time was of no consequence here.

### *Dyarrhoea at Uttarkasi*

During my return journey, I followed the same path by which I went to Gangotri. This time, however, I had a severe attack of diarrhoea on reaching Uttarkasi.

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This was perhaps what they call hill diarrhoea. There was excruciating pain in the stomach. I did not know what to do. Uttarkasi is a holy place — a miniature Kasi. Here, too, is the Manikarnika Ghat, the temples of Viswanath, Annapurna and of other gods and goddesses. During the days of pilgrimage, the place is very crowded. This is a comparatively populous town in these thinly populated regions. To avoid going out of the town again and again, I took shelter outside the town on the banks of the Ganga. There were big rocks around. I thought that it would be better if I remained in that solitary place till I was rid of the diarrhoea. It persisted for two days and I could not think of visiting the town. I was extremely weak and the town was quite some distance away, so I did not see a single person for those two days. On the third day I thought of returning to the town.

### *The Ministering Angel*

Hardly had I entertained the thought when I saw someone approaching me. The man was from this region. His clothes were a bit soiled. He enquired about me. He had come to know that I was ill and so he had come to take me to the town. When he learnt of my helpless condition there for the last two days, his eyes became moist. I was also moved by his sympathetic enquiries. I thought to myself, "Who can this man be? Who could have sent him here? Why is he taking so much pains to comfort me?" I do not think that I could have proceeded to the town unaided. It would take days to regain my strength after this severe attack.

Before his arrival, I was wondering where I could go in this unknown place. Who could give me a little soft-boiled rice and lemon to take with it? But I had not to entertain such thoughts for long. He came as if sent by God. I was relieved of all my worries. He very care-

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fully helped me up and supporting me took me slowly to his hut. It was a small hut at this end of the town. There were two or three earthen pots and a fire-place of three stones. This was the only property in the hut. He procured from somewhere a lemon for me and quickly cooked some rice. He fed me lovingly. He tried his best to make me comfortable. When I finished my meal, he was very happy. My heart gets filled with a very pleasant feeling when I remember this incident. Oh! what satisfaction he felt in feeding a guest! I do not know how many guests and sick persons like me might have visited his small hut in the course of the years. The simple hut and its simple inhabitant made a deep impression on me. One can never forget the natural generosity and loving behaviour, such great virtues in so ordinary a man. There was no utensil or plate in which to take our food. There were two flat stones. The meal was served on them and we ate as heartily as one could desire.

*Madness veiling rare compassion*

That small hut in Uttarkasi has ever remained engraved in my heart along with its inhabitant. No one perhaps knew much about this kind and large-hearted man in Uttarkasi. Possibly every one in Uttarkasi regarded him as a mad man. He hailed from some village near Uttarkasi. He was a Brahmin by caste and was fairly handsome but seemed to be quite indifferent to his personal appearance. His hair was left uncombed. Nor was any oil applied to it. His clothes too were none too clean. Because of this, his good features did not strike one at first. In spite of this there was a natural brightness in his face. He always seemed to be smiling. That is why anyone seeing him would think he was mad. I, however, thought he was pretending to be mad lest people should recognise his greatness. To me it seemed he really

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desired that others should disrespect him and push him aside as one of no worth. Thus people would not know his real nature. Although he was a Brahmin, he used to love all and serve them in their difficulties. As he himself did not observe caste rules, other men of his caste regarded him a fool and had no dealings with him. But I could not discern any sign of madness in him. He was as it were a bright burning charcoal covered with ashes. While talking with others he used to ramble incoherently. But he never talked so with me. He was quite simple and reasonable when he talked with me.

However, with the patient and loving nursing of this unusual man, I recovered fully in two or three days. This little hut was of no significance in the eyes of the people. But to me it was the holiest spot to be remembered for the rest of my life. I cannot but wonder who could have told him about me and my illness and what made him go to that lonely spot and take so much trouble to restore me to health. I was a stranger. Why should he have cared so much for me? No one with a less sympathetic heart would understand him. Not that he served me alone. It was his habit to serve anyone in distress and offer him food which he used to collect for himself. He derived much joy in doing so. He needed very little food for himself and was satisfied with what little food that was kindly offered to him. His face always wore a calm and placid look.

### *Kindness incognito*

At last I came to know for certain that this man, who apparently looked like a fool, was not an ordinary man. How could I call such an intelligent, large-hearted and loving man an idiot? I do not know what I should call those who cannot recognise the greatness of such loving men who take delight in serving others without any thought of returns. I have often found hospitality, love,

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large-heartedness in the huts of the poor. They are scarcely to be met within palaces, with more than enough to spare. Even to-day we find that a hungry man would receive food in the poorest hut in our land. I was a silent witness of such sacrifices on many occasions in my wanderings. I have seen that the small lamp of human kindness shone brightly in the humblest of huts, while cold indifference darkened the palatial buildings of the rich. It is true that in the poor man's hut, you won't get material goods. But the hut throbs with a human heart. There are men who would understand you and would behave sympathetically with you. The merit which a poor but large-hearted man achieves in his small thatched hut is often greater than that obtained by a rich man in a mansion. Our great culture is perpetuated by the poor people living in thatched huts.

Long ago, it was the sage Bharadwaja, who stayed in a thatched hut in the vicinity of Prayag, who created out of his tapas, glory and heavenly bliss, to offer hospitality to mother queen Kausalya, Bharata, Satrughna and the residents of Ayodhya. Remember again the Brahmin who used to live by picking the grains in the harvested field. His family was starving because of famine. When one day he obtained some flour, a guest appeared. The hungry Brahmin offered him the flour and himself died of hunger. A mongoose came there and rolled on the ground and half of his body became golden. Sometime later at a sacrifice in the palace of the Emperor Yudhishthira, the mongoose declared that its glory could not be compared with the sacrifice of the Brahmin. The same glory and the power of tapasya is not yet extinct in the huts of Bharata. The poor men's huts still nourish the culture of our motherland. Glory be to Bharata!

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*Sage in disguise*

The poor man nursed me to health. I was still too weak to undertake a journey but I decided to leave Uttarkasi for Tehri. The man was visibly moved. He tried to persuade me to stay on for a few days longer. But I had still a long journey before me. So I thought it better to move on. I would not be able to complete the pilgrimage as I intended, if I were to lose more days. He finally agreed to my departure and I left Uttarkasi. That godly man accompanied me for some distance. Seeing his guileless nature and his sincere affection for me, I was much moved. I did not know how I could free myself from what I felt was my obligation to him. Whether he understood what I was thinking I cannot say but he mentioned quite casually, "There is severe cold in this region. I have never used a blanket in my life." I felt much relieved to hear him say this. My problem was solved. I put my blanket over him. I said to myself, "I am fortunate in being able to satisfy such an insignificant wish of a good and kind man." At last we parted here. I proceeded alone. He was standing there looking at me as I was going away from him. As I walked on I thought that this man, apparently mad, must be a great sage in disguise. I was pretty sure of this. I had heard from my boyhood that great sages behave like mad men so as to be able to remain in disguise among people. This man in Uttarkasi belonged to this class of saintly men.

I lost about four days in Uttarkasi on account of my illness. It took me another four days to reach Tehri. I had not seen the path to Gangotri from Uttarkasi via Dharasu, as I had left the metalled road from Dharasu to Gangotri and taken a different path for Jamnotri and had returned thence to Uttarkasi. And now I was on my way to Gangotri. I do not remember any event worth mentioning during my return journey. On reaching

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Tehri, I had a relapse of the diarrhoea. I think this was due to the fact that I left the place without being completely cured. At Tehri also, a Brahmin youth came to my rescue. He also obliged me much by attending on me with a calm and unruffled mind. I had not to stay here more than two days. I sent the Ganges water. I carried from Gangotri to our Baranagar Math in Calcutta through a Bengali Government servant. Ganges water is used for the daily worship of the Master.

I left Tehri for the temple of Chandravadani. The path led through dense forest. I met one or two persons of whom I enquired the way to the temple. I walked almost the whole day. It was towards evening that I caught a glimpse of the temple at the top of a steep hill which was surrounded by thick forest.

### *Sati's Hill*

I thought that this peak was especially created by the Lord for the temple of the Goddess Chadravadani. It stood apart from the adjoining ranges. I thought to myself that this great and glorious Himalaya has installed on one of his peaks, the great Mother of the Universe and then stood before her bowing all his heads in perfect obeisance. He is worshipping her, as it were, with fragrant flowers and fruits and thereby adding to his own glory. This peak stands alone almost perpendicular. Its presence added greatly to the natural beauty of this spot.

I reached the village which was at the foot of this hill. All the residents of the village were Muslims. This was the only village in the entire district of Garhwal, which was predominantly a Muslim village. They manufactured bangles out of lac. These bangles are worn by the hill people in this region. There was not a single Hindu home in the village. The only alternative

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for me was to leave the village and climb up the hill. But how was I to proceed? There was none to guide. I went round the hill and at last found a path which led to the temple. I climbed up the hill by this path and reached the temple at the top. By now evening had set in.

The top of the hill was flat as if specially designed to accommodate the temple of the Mother. I had a feeling that I was far above the noise and din of the world of men who take delight in quarrelling and fighting with each other. Not a single sound or murmur of the mundane world was audible here. Perfect stillness reigned. It seemed that all beings, sentient and insentient, had taken a vow of silence. Anyone coming to this spot would find himself merged in the divine silence. From this spot I had a long look at the never-ending expanse of the Himalayas. My fatigue had vanished and I was floating in the ethereal atmosphere of the Himalayas whose countless peaks occupied the earth and the heavens. The perennial mountains whose tops were piled high with snow brightened the surroundings with their dazzling smile as it were, indicating the greatness of the Great God. Rays of white and gold reflected from the snow brightened the entire earth. The snows were congealed in perennial beauty. All was quiet here. Not a sound could be heard. The entire universe was steeped in the great silence of Infinity. I felt blessed that I had a glimpse of the great and multifaced Mahamaya in the form of the Himalayas.

*Shrine of Chandravadana*

I looked around and stored in my heart the huge and beautiful image of the Himalayas. Then I entered the temple. I prostrated myself before Mahamaya and pondered upon Her glory. There is a symbol of the Mother which is worshipped daily. There is no image of

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the Goddess. The temple is of stone and is rather low and not very spacious. There is a house behind the temple for pilgrims. The wind blows very hard over the peak as if the deep silence is too much for the wind god. I imagined that the wind god was bent upon disturbing the Himalayas in samadhi. One might easily be blown away if one stood a bit carelessly on the peak. It was but natural that the temple could not be built very high. The task would have been almost impossible. In fact the peak itself can be regarded as a big temple of the Mother (Mahamaya).

There is hardly any scope for human handicraft or sculptural art in a temple where nature excels herself in natural beauty. That is why this region which abounds in holy places is not much known for architectural or sculptural excellence. It is only an infinitesimal part of the great power of Mahamaya that transforms a man into a skilful artist. A single glance of Mahamaya is sufficient to create an infinite number of universes. The same Mahamaya again creates her own temple in her own way in such a solitary place as this. She adorns her own creation in her own way. All human intelligence, manual excellence and artistic knowledge vanish in the very presence of Mahamaya who abides in Her own creation. That is why, I believe, people in Aryavarta, particularly the southerners, both the Hindus and the Buddhists, have taken great pains to create and decorate their own temples of the south. They took no pains to embellish the temples that are surrounded by such natural beauty as in the mountainous regions of Bharata.

### *The beauty and the silence*

I entered the temple and proceeded straight to the sanctum sanctorum. The inner temple comprises two rooms. One room is for the shrine and the other is used as kitchen and dwelling place of the priest. There was

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none else there except the priest. After sometime a man brought a pitcher of water from down below. He was the temple guard. He assisted the priest. He went down every day to bring water for cooking the food offered in the daily worship. He used to do other sundry jobs. So we three were together now on the solitary high peak of the mountain range. Our conversation broke the silence and I felt again we were still on earth and in human company. In that deep silence, our words sounded rather strange to us. The priest got busy preparing the food offerings for the Goddess. I asked him many questions about the deity Chandravadani.

I learnt from the priest and later on from the people of this region that this place was sanctified by the fall of "Sati's breast". On entering the inner sanctorum, I noticed that above our heads stretched a piece of cloth that served as the ceiling. I was told that the original yantra, which is a symbol of the Goddess, is not shown to anyone. It is always kept out of sight by the ceiling cloth. Even when the ceiling cloth is changed, the new cloth is spread before the old cloth is removed. It is believed that Acharya Sankara had come here and had installed a new yantra. It was on account of his injunction that the old yantra is not shown to anyone. Since then, nobody is allowed to see the original yantra. It is also said that if by chance anyone happens to have a look at the original yantra, he dies instantaneously. This belief obtains elsewhere also, that is to say, at all the sacred places of the Goddess. It is forbidden to see the original seat of the Goddess. This peak of the Goddess Chandravadani is within the limits of the Tehri State. The Raja of Tehri provides for the worship at the temple from olden days. There is a village by name Pujar near this peak. The Brahmins of this place have been the priests of the temple for generations. The village revenue also goes to the priests in perpetual succession. The temple guard also gets his pay from this revenue.

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*The celestial worship*

The priest was preparing the food offering of the Mother and at the same time talking with me. He gave me a lot of information about the temple. The worship, then vespers and food offering, were all over by 9 o'clock at night. The food offering is of moistened rice pounded on a flat stone and then made into cakes fried in oil. I don't know why this particular cake came to be offered to the Mother. The priest also could not tell me the reason. The offering consisted of this cake, roti and a little milk. The priest gave me a portion of the holy offering and it was so delicious it seemed that I had tasted nothing like it before. I felt very happy and sat there after partaking the prasadam in a pleasant and peaceful mood. After sometime the priest came to me and requested me to go to the pilgrim's rest-house (Dharmasala) outside for sleeping. Later he himself told me that a few days before a pilgrim with ochre clothes had come there and after nightfall ran away with the silver utensils which were for the worship of the Mother. Before this incident, the Sadhus and Sannyasis were allowed to sleep in the temple during the night. But now only the guard and the priest remained in the temple. Others are not allowed to sleep there.. So I had to come out and pass the night outside in the rest-house.

It is really beyond my ability to write down what my feelings were that night at the sight of the serene Himalayan ranges bathed in the soft light of the moon. My heart overflowed again and again with joy. I came out of the temple and sat in the silence, looking at the beautiful Himalayas so serene and calm in the moonlight. I spent the whole night in joy, remembering the grace of the Mother. The next day also I was present at the time of worship and had a little of the offerings. Except for the guard and the priest, none had visited the temple during those two days. On the third day, I went to the spring

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below, from where water is brought for daily worship. I spent two nights here and then thought of proceeding to Srinagar. I was not at all satisfied with a stay of only two nights in the holy precincts of the Goddess Chandravadani. I would have stayed a few days more, had there been enough subsistence. But the temple cannot provide food for a guest for more than a couple of days and that only from the food offerings. To remain in such a remote place is itself a hardship and the articles necessary for the daily worship of the Goddess have to be procured from below by the priest. It was on account of these difficulties, that I could not stay there for a few more days, although I wished to. I bowed before the Mother and prayed that she would some day bring me here again.

### *Shall come again*

I took leave of the Mother saying that I would come again some time. The priest advised me to proceed to Srinagar as it was on the way to Kedar and Badrinarayan. It was just a day's journey from this temple. After walking for about half a day, through a dense forest, by a lonely track, one comes to a metalled road from Tehri to Srinagar. The priest accompanied me for a distance and showed me a way to descend the hill. He pointed to his village which was far away and said that if I reached that village, there would be no further difficulty in reaching Srinagar.

### *Down the perilous slope*

As I walked along that unfrequented path covered with dense undergrowth of grass and wild shrubs, I realised that I could very easily lose my way. No human being would likely to come that way. The forest beetles were creaking sharply. I walked on for some distance and nearly lost my way. The distant village Pujar,

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which was visible when I first set out, could no more be seen now and I had no idea where I was going. The forest was becoming more and more dense. I was surrounded on all sides by big trees and could see nothing beyond. A canopy of tree-tops above permitted not a ray of sunshine to penetrate into that forest even at noon time. The path was leading me nowhere and I could not decide how to come out of that deep forest. I could not have descended far below from the temple. As I felt bewildered what to do, I sat down. But think of the glory of this place! I was surrounded by difficulties on all sides and could not find my way out and yet I was not afraid at all. I still hoped and felt that I would soon come out of this difficulty. I was almost sure that I would be merged in happiness in whatever part I would happen to be in this divinely glorious place. I sat there for about an hour. I thought that some one would come that way and I would ask him the way. But not a single soul appeared. Seeing there was no other alternative, I got up saying, "Glory to the Mother! Jai Ma!" I started straight ahead. The forest grew more dense and the undergrowth more impenetrable. I was descending and the path was becoming slippery. It is always more difficult and risky to come down a hill than to ascend one. Those who have any experience of mountaineering know this very well. While we ascend we have full control over ourselves, but not so when we descend. It is difficult to save oneself if one's balance is lost. We roll down with an accelerated speed. I shall describe later in course of my narration what precautions are to be taken while ascending and descending such steep mountain slopes.

This was just the beginning of many such ascents and descents that were to come. There were many steeper hills to be climbed on the way up to Badrinarayan and Kedarnath. But now I was just moving ahead not knowing where I would reach. Not a foot-mark was

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visible in that dense forest. I was just going wherever my feet took me, or rather, wherever the Almighty was taking me. The descent was becoming steeper. I thought that it would not be possible to go down the hill by this path. I could hardly secure a proper foothold. The descent was a precarious one. Luckily it was not a rocky slope but soft and grassy with shrubs here and there. With my feet planted in the soft earth and my back pressed against the slope and taking hold of the shrubs and grass on my way, I came down about three miles.

It is hardly possible for me to describe how I made my way down that steep slope. It takes almost a day to cover a distance of six or seven miles in these hilly tracks. After mid-day I came to a plateau. I noticed a farmer roasting unripened wheat over a fire in his field. This is usually done before the wheat crop is harvested. The roasted grain tastes milky and sweet and during these days men, women and children take delight in coming together in a field and eating the roasted wheat and barley. It is an occasion of much joy for these hill folk. I had a few minor bruises while descending from the hill side. Having come down safely and seeing the appetising food before me, I was a bit delighted. On my perilous journey down the slope, the thought of hunger never arose. But now I realised that it was past mid-day and a fire was burning in my stomach. I had to quench it. The farmer brother was wholly absorbed in roasting the wheat grain. When he saw me standing before him, he was startled and looked at me in astonishment. Then he asked me in his own language how I came there and from where. When I told him that I came there from the temple of Chandravadani Devi, his astonishment was still greater.

### *The Mother guides*

The reason for his surprise was that even the tribal folk who subsist on hunting do not dare to enter that dense

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forest. No one, so far as he remembered, ever came down by that way from the temple of Chandravadani Devi. He began to praise the Goddess and said, "It must have been the Mother Chandravadani Herself who accompanied you down that awful descent from the hill." I too, realised that what he was saying was actually so. I had similar experiences before. When engulfed in a dangerous situation, I was safely conducted out of it by the One who always comes to the succour of the helpless. It is because of this unforeseen help that I am alive to narrate them. I was often in the most dangerous of situations and yet came out unscathed by the mercy of God and of God alone. I shall try to narrate these incidents in the course of my story. I was much moved by the spontaneous praise of the Mother by that illiterate farmer of the hill and my faith in the Almighty was greatly strengthened. The farmer brother offered me some of the roasted wheat. I took a handful of it and drank a glass of water. After resting a while, I asked him the way to Srinagar.

## 5. SRINAGAR AND RUDRAPRAYAG

### *At Srinagar*

Once again I took the forest path. About a couple of hours later I came to the highway which runs from Tehri to Srinagar. The road was quite wide and even. I walked leisurely along till I reached Srinagar without difficulty in the evening. It was after many days that I was again in a place full of people. I had travelled in the state of Garhwal from Jamnotri to Gangotri and I did not see any other town except Tehri, which was fairly big. Here I was in British Garhwal on the bank of the river Alakananda. The State of Garhwal is on the west

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of the Alakananda while British Garhwal is on the east. Srinagar is situated along the bank of the Alakananda, which runs north to south. Before the British came, Srinagar, the capital of Garhwal, was a prosperous town. Even to-day it is a busy trading centre with a fairly large population. It is beautifully situated and is surrounded by a picturesque landscape which attracts people to settle here. The official headquarters of the Garhwal division is at Powri, a place very near Srinagar. During the season for pilgrimage to Badrinarayan, Srinagar overflows with pilgrims. This is the only town where pilgrims camp in large numbers. The hills round about Srinagar are not very high. A paved road runs through the market. The buildings are all of stone. Various articles are in display at the shops and one may leisurely walk from one end to the other choosing whatever articles one fancies. Relics of the palace, which was once a spacious building of black polished stone, are to be seen scattered on the bank of the Alakananda at the southern end of the town. The skill of the sculptors may yet be seen on these beautifully carved slabs of black stone which once formed part of a noble structure. The palace and its ruins now stand as relics of the past glory of the once great Garhwal rulers. I failed to notice such beautiful ruins elsewhere in Garhwal or in Kumaon. There is one school for minors and a hospital in the town. On reaching Srinagar, I first took a dip in the Alakananda and then went to the Kamaleshwar Math.

The temple of Kamaleshwar Siva is an ancient and notable shrine in Srinagar. The chief abbot then was Dayalpuri. I had once met his son on my way to Dehradun from Rishikesh. He had asked me then to come and stay in the Math. I remembered it now and came there. I prostrated at the shrine and then enquired about the abbot's son. He happened to be there and received me very cordially. The temple had some landed property. The abbot could have very well spent a

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portion of the temple income for the welfare of persons belonging to his sect or for any other cause. But I found that he was not very mindful of his duties. Apart from the immovable property of the temple, there were donations from the pilgrims going to Badrinath and Kedarnath, every year. But with the careful administration of the abbot, the wealth went on accumulating year after year. The abbot was handsome, courteous and well-dressed. He wore gold bracelets, one on each hand. Though a householder (Gharbari), he wore ochre robes.

### *Close-fisted Trustees*

There are in Bengal a sect of Vaishnava householders who claim their origin from the recluse followers of the Bhakti cult of Gauranga Mahaprabhu. Similarly the Gharwari Gosains are householders who broke away from the Dasanami Sannyasin Orders started by the disciples of Acharya Sankara*. In the Uttarkhand, this cult is widely spread. The Gosains belonging to this cult often manage temples and perform the daily worship at well-known temples. The temples of the Gods and Goddesses belonging to the Sakta cult are generally attended by such Gosains who retain their original Sannyasin titles such as Puri or Giri. They wear only ochre-coloured caps as a symbol of sannyasa. The seat of the original abbot is preserved and worshipped daily. That was the only sign left of the traditional sannyasa in the temple. I could not see any other sign of the glorious tradition of sannyasins.

I would have been happy, had the donations or other income of the temple been spent for the welfare of society. But I was extremely sorry to find that the abbot

*The four chief disciples of Acharya Sankara had classified the monks into ten categories, viz., Giri, Parvat, Sagar, Vana, Aranya, Puri, Bharati, Saraswati, Tirtha and Ashram.

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was altogether oblivious of this social obligation. This general apathy for the social cause is prevalent in every Math in the Uttarakhand. I shall later relate how things are at the Joshi Math. I had an opportunity to talk upon many things with the abbot. I took this opportunity to bring home to him the need to utilize the income of the temple on some good cause. On entering the Uttarakhand, I was greatly disappointed to learn that the monasteries of the Sannyasins here are not conducted for the purpose they were meant for. I could never imagine that the Maths in this holy land of ascetics, established by the various orders of Sannyasins, were completely in the hands of householders or Gharwari Sadhus mentioned above. As the son of the abbot knew me well, I had otherwise a very comfortable stay here. They did everything to make my stay pleasant. At last I was glad to see some good sense dawn on the abbot. He saw my need for some warm clothing and gave me unasked a blanket. On my way to Chandravadani, I had already received a blanket from the Raj Purohit of Tehri, but it did not remain with me for long, as mentioned earlier. There was no doubt that I needed a blanket. The abbot had to spend some money for it. I thus allowed him the satisfaction of obliging me.

There are other temples also but they are not so well-known. I went alone to have a look around the town and visit all the shrines. In Srinagar, the Brahmins are in large number. But they all belong to this region. Some of them are well versed in Sanskrit lore. I came to know one very learned Brahmin, Ambadatta Joshi. He had an Avadhuta Gita. It was a joy to read it. He had promised to have a copy prepared for me. I could have it on my return from Badarikashram.

### *The Call of Kedarbadri*

I had entered Uttarakhand from Rishikesh via Dehradun and Mussouri. I could not, therefore, have a

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bath at the holy confluence of the Bhagirathi and Alaka-nanda at Devaprayag. So I decided to return from Badarikashram by this route. According to the calcula-tions of the hill people, the distance from Haridwar to Kedar and Badrinarayan is approximately 120 miles and Srinagar lies midway between the two. If these calculations are correct then Kedarnath might be about 60 miles from Srinagar. But I learn that Srinagar now has changed a great deal. After the tragedy of the collapse of the Gola Lake, the new township has been built a little higher up on the mountain side. I stayed for about three days in Srinagar and early in the morning on the fourth day, I proceeded to Rudraprayag.

Rudraprayag is 19 miles from Srinagar. According to the hill people it is twelve kos. This means they regard one kos equal to one and a half mile. I passed the town wall and noticed that there were numerous temporary shelters (chatty) by the roadside outside the wall to accommodate pilgrims and sadhus of various denominations. A chatty is a place with a small shop with some space roomy enough for a small number of pilgrims. The place though usually unoccupied most of the time, was full of pilgrims now and looked like an extension of the town. There was a two-way movement on the road. Pilgrims, who had their holy bath at Haridwar on the occasion of Mesh Sankranti and had gone to Badrinarayan, were now returning. But the majority of pilgrims were going upward. Those going to Badarikashram via Gangotri also arrived here. I remem-ber we reached Badrinarayan by the end of July (Ashadha). Pilgrims keep pouring in till the end of August (Sravana). Thereafter in September, October and November, as the cold advances, there are only a few pilgrims, mostly from this hill region. I left Srinagar and was no more travelling alone. On my way to Gangotri I was accompanied by a solitary pilgrim or two. But now I was one among a host of pilgrims.

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*Comrades on the road*

The pilgrims' joyful shouts of "Jai Kedarnath, Jai Badari Visal" echoed and re-echoed in the mountains. The serenity and silence that prevails here had now fled to the valleys and caves in the distant mountain ranges. The entire mountainous region which normally is never visited by people of central and southern India, was now filled with thousands of pilgrims trudging along from all corners of India. The whole region was now resounding with songs and joyous shouts in different languages of a host of people from all parts of the country. This was all due to the will of the Lord. It was His glory that attracted millions of people. They had left behind their near and dear ones and their homes and were marching to their destination, spending freely on the way their hard earned savings. They were even glad to undergo the difficulties one has to meet when ascending these rugged paths. Some carried on their back their children or infirm parents or relatives. They were inspired with the one idea to have a sight of the great God Kedarnath or Badrinarayan. Glory to The Great God! It requires strong determination for one setting out on a pilgrimage to Badri-Kedar. The pilgrims count little the inconveniences or difficulties they meet with on the way, so keen are they on reaching Kedarnath and Badrinarayan. One is pleased to see their devotion, their singleness of purpose, their fortitude and their keen desire to have á darsan of their cherished deity. Devotion springs up in us also and we stoutly declare that God is great. The very sight of these pious pilgrims elevates us. All the travellers on this road are imbued with the same desire and hope, the same ideal and goal. All are united as one great host of pilgrims — Rajas and subjects, rich and poor, men and women, old and young, boys and girls. They all meet together in the same place, all stay in the same chatti, bathe in springs together, eat together, rest together.

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They all have the same words in their acclamations for the deity — "Jai Kedar, Jai Badri Visal". It was here that I understood the true significance of a pilgrimage. I understood why the Vedic sages and the Aryan Rishis had made it obligatory to visit places of pilgrimage. It is on a pilgrimage that men and women become conscious of the virtues of renunciation, abstinence, penance and similar moral qualities which arise in their mind and inspire them. The holy pilgrim spots are efficacious in cleansing even carnal man of his passions. A man becomes pure and God-minded. After leaving Srinagar I keenly observed this assemblage of pilgrims who had come from all parts of India. My conviction was that they were all being drawn, physically and mentally, to Lord Badrinarayan. It was a matter of great happiness for me to see the large gathering of pilgrims, all inspired with the one desire to reach the temple of their devotion. It was a glorious sight to ponder upon. I thought to myself that it was surely due to His power that men, women, children, the aged and the infirm were all moving joyfully towards Him disregardful of the discomforts of so arduous a journey. I can hardly think that, without the divine Will, these men would have thought of undertaking such a long and difficult journey in these mountainous regions. Glory be to Him who breathes strength and happiness into His devotees!

Rest-houses are to be had at distances of every three or four miles, where pilgrims may stay and purchase rice, dal, milk, ghee, flour and potatoes. The prices at this time are a bit higher. It was not necessary for me to ask for alms on the way. The pilgrims take it upon themselves to provide the monks and sannyasins with food. Some well-to-do pilgrims supply the alms for the monks and ascetics who travel along with them. I walked from Srinagar till midday, when I reached a rest-house, where one of the pilgrims offered me alms.

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### *Rudraprayag*

I reached Rudraprayag at dusk. The road constructed by the Public Works Department from Lakshman Jhula, a few miles north of Rishikesh, to Badrinarayan, bifurcates at Rudraprayag and goes to Kedarnath. There is a big concrete bridge at Rudraprayag over the Alakananda. One has to leave the road to Badrinarayan and cross this bridge to reach Rudraprayag. The confluence of the Alakananda and Mandakini occurs at Rudraprayag. The two routes to Badrinarayan and to Kedarnath also meet here. It was a pleasing sight for me to find both the confluence of the two rivers and the meeting of the two roads at the same place. There is a rest-house on the bank of the Alakananda on the Badrinarayan road. There is no other habitation here except two temples which are situated on the slope of the mountain above the confluence. There are two or three dwelling houses of those who reside here in the service of the two temples. The priest of the temple is a Dasanami Gosain of this region and he has a Bengali disciple. I was a bit surprised to see a Bengali gentleman as disciple of a rustic and uncouth pahari Gosain.

### *At the Confluence*

At Rudraprayag, I had a dip in the holy confluence. My mind was perfectly calm. I remained sitting at the confluence — a beautiful and heavenly place — for a long time, watching the rippling waters of the Alakananda running in joy, as it were, to embrace the Mandakini. A thousand thoughts seemed to fill my mind. The Mandakini with her dark blue waters had come here after washing the Lotus Feet of the Lord Sri Kedarnath. Her gurgling waters spelt music to my ears. The Mandakini was rushing into the crystalline waters of the Alakananda, which had come down from the Alakapuri of

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Kubera (near Badrinath). To me the confluence was reminiscent of the divine image of Hari-Hara. The dark water of the Mandakini was putting, as it were, her arm round Alakananda and the two of them were rushing to meet the sanctifying waters of the Bhagirathi at Deva-prayag. I was absorbed in such thoughts when the shadows of night enveloped me and, oblivious of time, I spent the night in extreme happiness.

## 6. GUPTAKASI AND UKHIMATH

*Agastya Muni*

Next day I proceeded towards Kedarnath. Up to Rudraprayag the road had run side by side with the Alakananda. Now it ran along the Mandakini. I was gradually gaining entrance into the inner precincts of the great Himalayas, the crowned king of all mountains. I found the Himalayas arrayed in ever-changing garments of snow of diverse shades. I was filled with joy and wonder and amazement and the sight increased my eagerness to reach Kedarnath and the great Badrinarayan.

I left Rudraprayag behind and reached Agastyamuni at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. The place was crowded with pilgrims. Every one was busy preparing his meals. Some were purchasing food at the shops, some busy cooking over their fires. They were all from various parts of India and speaking in different languages. It was a wonderful sight. Agastyamuni is a holy place, with a small village, providing a spacious rest-house and a few shops. Some old temples add to the sanctity of the place.

It is said that the place was sanctified by the great sage Agastya who performed penance here. Since then

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the place is known after him. The spot is indeed suitable for austerities. The village is situated upon a large meadow above the road. It slopes gradually down to the sweetly murmuring Mandakini. The place is ideally suited for a life of holy penance. The climate also is mild. After I left Srinagar, this was the only place I noticed that had a vast stretch of level ground. I took a holy bath in Mandakini, visited the few temples and rested for a while in one of them. I began to ruminate on the place sanctified by ancient sages and thought what bliss it would be for me to see one of those great ancient sages emaciated by penance, bestowing his blessings on me and all.

### *Hospitality of a Sadhu in a loin cloth*

I was sitting in the temple absorbed in these holy thoughts when a monk, his body besmeared with ashes and wearing only a loin cloth, came smilingly towards me and invited me to have my alms from him. After midday, the monk baked some chapatis (flat bread) and cooked some dal and served me a hearty meal. I can never forget him and his love and hospitality. He cooked the food in a room adjoining the temple. Possibly, he was staying there to offer daily worship to the deity. He was between fifty and fifty-five years of age. I was very happy to have the company of this noble monk in this holy and ancient place. It was surely a matter of good fortune to have seen a holy man in this holy place. I had a little rest after meals and then again commenced my journey. In fact I was so much in love with this place that I had no mind to proceed further just then. But I had a long journey before me. So I had to leave at times such charming places only after a day or two. From Agastyamuni it was an uphill climb. As I ascended, the air grew cooler. At the next rest-house that night I began to feel the cold. Next morning

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I began climbing a very high hill and reached Gupta-Kasi, a small town.

*In Gupta-Kasi*

Gupta-Kasi is situated almost at the top of a high mountain. The panoramic view from here is most charming. One gets a pleasant view of the Mandakini winding her course in the valley below. On the hill just opposite is Ukhi Math, another attractive little town. Gupta-Kasi and Ukhi Math are at about the same height and face each other. Gupta-Kasi has two temples built of stone with two beautiful images of stone and of metal, but I do not remember the names of the deities. There are two brazen cow's heads from whose mouths flows a copious stream of water from the mountainside down into the Mandakini. I thought that the design of these water-sporuts was a very ingenious one. It was very convenient for the pilgrims who can bathe and cook in Gupta-Kasi. The inhabitants of Gupta-Kasi also carry water to their homes from these brazen conduits. Of course there are other springs here and there and people use that water also. Gupta-Kasi is at a fairly high altitude over which cold strong winds from the snowy tops of Kedarnath blow. Here the winter is long and the snowfall considerable during mid-winter. I happened to meet the monk who had offered me food at Agastya-muni. I never thought I would see him here. Both of us were very happy. When I saw him first at Agastya-muni temple, I thought he was a temple priest. But now I realised that he was a pilgrim to Badrinarayan and Kedarnath, just as I was. He liked Agastyamuni. That was why he had stayed there for a day or two. I had, on our previous meeting, been very much drawn to him because of his frank and generous behaviour. Here too, I noticed some of his noble qualities. He was very happy to see me. His body was smeared with holy ashes and

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looked bright and fair. When we saw each other, his face brightened up with a smile. This time also, he invited me to partake of the prasad of Mahavira. He was verily a devotee of Mahavira. His body was a testimony to this. He used to utter the holy name of Mahavira off and on. A few of his teeth in front were missing and so gave him the look of a child when he laughed. He belonged to the Vaishnava sect. But he carried no external indications on his body, such as a rosary or sandal-paste marks. He did not display any pride in his being a Vaishnava. This was obvious from the affinity he felt for those belonging to other sects. He had a special regard for the sannyasins of the Saiva cult. Generally speaking, the Vaishnavite Sadhus are not so liberal. One seldom sees a Vaishnava very affable towards persons belonging to other sects.

### *Pleasant Company*

After inviting me for the mid-day offerings of his cherished deity Hanuman, the monk went into the forest to fetch firewood. Meanwhile, I visited the temples in Gupta-Kasi and had a walk in the village. The monk had by now returned from the forest and was seated in the corner of the room in deep meditation. I had heard from him that he had only one blanket to protect him from the cold, which he had dropped somewhere in the forest when collecting firewood. He had gone back for it but could not find it. It was quite cold where he was meditating. So I placed my blanket round him while he was in deep meditation and went elsewhere. The monk was so absorbed in meditation and his face was beaming with such a joy that I thought that he must be in union with his favourite deity.

I returned after a while. The monk was busy cooking and baking the chapatis and singing from the

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Tulsi Ramayana and Vinaya Patrika. He had a melodious voice. I cannot express the joy I felt while hearing the sweet tunes. The devotional songs in the Vinaya Patrika are so graphic that the listener feels as if he is seeing the child Rama frolicking before him. I was already very happy on account of having come to a holy place. Added to this, I was now in the holy and pleasant company of the monk. My joy was tenfold now. The monk finished the cooking. He offered the food to his favourite deity and then we partook of our food. The monk had no other belongings with him except a loincloth. How he managed to feed sadhus, I do not know. He offered food to two more sadhus and then took for himself what remained. With that little food, he was more than satisfied.

### *The Backbone of Indian Culture*

I was surprised at his deep faith and devotion. The monk did not, perhaps, proceed further to Kedarnath. When questioned, he told me that the Lord Kedarnath had blessed him with a vision at Gupta-Kasi itself. What was the point then in going further? I really do not have words of praise for his faith. God is really great and merciful. That is why He is called Bhagavan, the Bestower. It is really due to the fruition of one's good actions of innumerable lives that one has a pure and magnanimous heart like that of this monk. The great penniless persons like him have often offered their own food to hungry beings and saved them. It is due to their greatness that the great Indian culture survives to this day. Glory be to India! It is due to the sacrifice of these monks, the strength of character of these great souls, that India still holds its head high. Very few of the modern educated youth know this. The character of holy men, who render selfless service to the poor and the miserable, is the basis upon which the edifice of this great

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nation stands. What cannot be achieved with the resolutions passed in hundreds of committees can be achieved by the spotless character of a great man. Though few, these persons are still there in India. But for them, India would have been nowhere. Her culture would have been razed to the ground.

### *Towards Ukhi Math*

I learnt from one of the local people that there was, between Gupta-Kasi and Kedarnath, a rest-house named Phatachatti and that a Bengali Sannyasi was residing there since long. They call him Maharaj of Phatachatti. He had been to Tibet and also to Kailasa and Manasa Sarovara. The person who informed me of this monk advised me to go to Phatachatti, since I, too, had a desire to go to Kailas. I was, therefore, anxious to see the Maharaj of Phatachatti. On reaching Gupta-Kasi, I learnt that Maharaj had gone to Ukhi Math. I proceeded to Ukhi Math lest I should miss him again.

To reach Ukhi Math, you have to come down the mountain-side and then climb the same distance up the mountain just opposite. I left Gupta-Kasi and carefully came down to the Mandakini. There is a bridge, such as are seen in these parts, over the Mandakini here. I crossed it and stood again before the rugged mountain side I was to climb. It took me a long time to do this. I do not remember the distance between Gupta-Kasi and Ukhi Math. But I remember I had started before dawn and it was about 10 o'clock in the morning by the time I reached Ukhi Math.

### *The Scenic Beauty of Ukhi Math*

I have already said that Ukhi Math is situated on the top of a high mountain. If we look from here towards

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the North, we can see the snow-clad peaks of Kedarnath. The peaks are more vivid from here than from Gupta-Kasi. It was a very exhausting climb to Ukhi Math but the sight from here was rewarding. I no more felt the fatigue; the place was so exhilarating. The uphill walk was so steep and arduous that I was almost drenched with perspiration. I rested for a while before entering Ukhi Math. The place was very quiet. The long Himalayan range from here looked serene and grand. I kept gazing at the sight so as to remember it for ever. The fatigue of the journey had passed away. I was filled with joy and happiness. I felt as if I had not strained at all while climbing up this big mountain.

After a while I walked into Ukhi Math, a notable place of pilgrimage on the route from Kedarnath to Badrinath. The small township is worth visiting. I heard that King Bana, a great devotee of Bhagavan Sankara, had his capital here. The princess Usha was carried away from this very place. It is usual among the Hindi speaking people to pronounce sh as kh. The name Usha was, therefore, pronounced as Ukha. The place came to be known as Ukha Math and later on as Ukhi Math. I now met the Swamiji Maharaj of Phatachatti.

### *Maharaj of Phatachatti*

There is one Government dispensary and a hospital at Ukhi Math. The British Government deserves credit for opening a number of dispensaries on the way to Badrinath and Kedarnath for the benefit of pilgrims. The Maharaj was in the dispensary, for the doctor was one of his devotees. The Maharaj asked the doctor to arrange for my food etc. The Maharaj was reading the Bhagavad Gita in one of the rooms of the dispensary building. In the course of the conversation I learnt that Maharaj had visited a number of holy places and that he

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was residing in that cold region for the last twenty years. On account of the severe cold, his hands and feet as also his cheeks were chapped. But I did not make any enquiries about it. As he had been residing in this mountainous area, away from his home, he had acquired the habits of these hill people and one could hardly take him to be a Bengali. It was only during the few months of pilgrimage, that he used to come in contact with people of other regions. The number of Bengali pilgrims travelling this way is considerably small. It was, therefore, seldom that he came across a Bengali pilgrim. He used to offer flour, lentils, dal, etc. to any such pilgrim. I did not notice him showing any preferential treatment towards a Bengali pilgrim. The people from this reigon used to help the Maharaj to keep a stock of such articles as pilgrims usually need. I learnt that Maharaj had come there from Phatachatti to see Sjt. Adityaram Bhattacharya, a professor of Sanskrit from Muir College, Allahabad. Sjt. Bhattacharya was to come there on his return journey from Kedarnath that day. I asked Maharaj about the route to Tibet. I learnt from him that he had been to Tibet via the Nitighat, a place near Joshi Math. He had returned from Tibet after spending one year there. He visited Kailasa and Manasa Sarovara on his return journey. He advised me to follow the same route by the Nitighat pass, as it was the most convenient. There was of course another route via Badrinarayan and the Managhat pass. But it is not so convenient and Manasa Sarovara does not lie on this route. He also narrated the dangers and difficulties which a pilgrim has to face on this route. The pilgrim should be prepared to undergo any difficulty and face any danger which at times may cost him his life. Then only can he achieve the darsan of Kailasa and Manasa Sarovara. He recited a couplet* well-known among the people of this region.

* Who would see the Manasa Sarovar? There it snows when there are no clouds. Hail storms also make you miserable.

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*Unfrequented spots near Kedar*

So few people dare to go to Manasa Sarovara and Mount Kailasa. Seeing that I was bent on visiting these two places, Maharaj asked me to spend a year in the Uttarakhand. If one goes to Kailasa after spending a year in the Uttarakhand, then one is able to bear the severe cold of Tibet. He then gave me a number of tips for my journey to Tibet. He spoke of numerous beautiful spots in the vicinity of Kedarnath which remain unfrequented. Kedarnath is almost always covered with snow during the major part of the year. He told me that there are two beautiful lakes known as Chorawadi and Vasukitalao on the very mountain where the temple of Kedarnath is situated, or rather, where the Lord Siva has manifested himself in the form of a lingam. These two lakes are, however, a little away from the general route and therefore less known. The Himalayas are always clad with heaps of snow. The Mandakini trickles down from here and is as thin as a finger. She makes her way over a sandy bed and then rushes noisily down. There is one more beautiful spot, the Mahaprastha, from where the Pandavas, headed by Yudhishthira, climbed to heaven. All these places are within two miles of Kedarnath. But it is almost impossible to locate and reach them without the help of a local Panda or priest. Maharaj asked me repeatedly to visit these places.

*Adityaram Babu*

While we were thus engaged in conversation, Adityaram Babu arrived riding on a horse. I was meeting him for the first time. I had no idea I would be meeting such a learned man at this remote place. He was such a noble soul and a cultured person. I spent a day in his company at Ukhi Math. Pandit Bhavani Datta Joshi,

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Deputy Collector of the district of Garhwal, residing at Almora at that time, was a close friend of Adityaram Babu. It was he who had arranged for his pilgrimage to the Uttarakhand including such travelling facilities as ponies and porters. I had been meanwhile enjoying the beautiful views of Kedarnath from Ukhi Math, and his fascinating descriptions of those summits of Kedarnath further enkindled my desire to visit that place. I also heard from him that a European gentleman was so much overwhelmed with the scenic beauty of that place that he wrote in his published travel diary that he had never seen such a beautiful spot anywhere else. Adityaram Babu, an honest and plain-speaking man, confessed that Mahamaya was so powerful that he was nevertheless home-sick even in that holy place, and shed tears. I spent that day in the pleasant company of this gentleman.

### *The Chief Priest of Ukhi Math*

In the evening we both visited the shrines in Ukhi Math. Kailasnath Mahadeo is the chief deity here. A Jangam* sadhu was the Mohanta of this monastery. He was also the chief priest of the Kedarnath temple. Most of the temple attendants stay at Ukhi Math which is, as it were, the headquarters of Baba Kedarnath. Pilgrims from all over India come to Kedarnath to offer Him worship there. These articles of worship are then collected and brought and stored at Ukhi Math. So the

* Jangam, Lingayat, Lingavastu and Virasaiva are the various names of this sect. This sect originated in the South in Kalyana about the beginning of the 11th Century. Basava was the founder Acharya. He is said to be an incarnation of Nandi (Siva's bull). The persons belonging to this sect worship the Sivalingam. The sadhus of this sect keep the Lingam hung on a thread round their neck, or they keep it in their turbans. The religious books of this sect are written in Kannada. This sect is spread all over Karnataka, Telengana and Mysore and have many temples and monasteries in this area.

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abbot of Ukhi Math is the chief trustee, custodian and administrator of all the property of Kedarnath. As such, he also had his own paraphernalia. We entered the main shrine and after the darsan we came to meet the abbot, he being the chief functionary of the Kedarnath temple. The abbot or Mohanta, as he is called, was seated on a high silken seat under a silken canopy. He beckoned to us with a benign smile to take our seats. He was of a slightly dark complexion and rather fat. He had grey hair and a grey flowing beard. He could, therefore, be taken for an aged person. When we entered the hall, we saw there was gold and silver all around. He had before him two trays full of silver rupees and gold mohours glowing resplendently. There were maces, walking-sticks, canes of gold and silver and the hall appeared as a store house of material glory.

### *The Lure of Gold*

Every year, the poor and the rich, Rajas, Maharajas and others, visit Kedarnath and Badri Visal and freely offer money, gold and silver to the deity to earn merit and a passport to heaven. The Mohanta was the sole administrator of this property and this was evident from his personal attire. He had on his neck, strings of Sivalingas of gold and silver. He wore silk clothes and occupied the seat in the hall as any prince would have done in his gay abundance. The wealth around him had probably affected him and it was obvious that he regarded this material wealth as the only object of worship in this world. He belonged to the venerable profession of a monk, and also was the head of one of the most important temples in India. He could, therefore, purchase all the happiness and enjoy the most beautiful things of this earth in a remote place like Ukhi Math. The Mohanta appeared elated and was perhaps intoxicated with such an abundance of wealth. As I entered the

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hall in which he was seated, I thought the very doors of that hall were closed to the light of the deity who had created such a varied and colourful universe and whose effulgence shone in all the corners of the world. All the grandeur of the Mother of the Universe vanished, as it were, the moment it came to this place.

The entire range of the Himalayas bear an infinite number of universes. It was here that Uma Devi played in Her childhood on the lap of Her Mother. It was here that She often consorted with the great God, Mahadev. It was due to this holy union of infinite power and infinite intelligence that the place abounded in natural beauty, freshness and purity. This was the play-ground of the Purusha and Prakriti. The Bholanath, Sankara, was particularly fond of this spot and decided to remain here. This was the place where sages entered into Samadhi effortlessly. This is the place where Bhagavati Amba stopped Her sport and took a human birth by which it acquired a sanctity greater than that of heaven, where every particle of dust is charged with the Mother's divine power, and from where the Mother breathes life and consciousness into every being. Oh Mother, in this holy land of yours, the Mohanta of Ukhi Math sits blinded by Maya. He sits there puffed up with pride on account of his wordly riches. Oh Mother, the Mohanta is almost blind to Your glory. His eyes are, again and again, rivetted upon the pilgrims and their offerings. Oh Mother, You are great. Glory be to You!

### *The Gateway of the Capital of the Universe*

There I was overwhelmed with innumerable thoughts. The heavenly sights almost brought about a great transformation in me. Anyone would have been equally moved on account of the bewitching beauty of that place.

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I have been trying to describe its scenic beauty so long but I know that I am not able to capture its grandeur in words. Words really fail me. When I looked at the Himalayas from Ukhi Math, I felt that the Supreme Lord of the Universe had established His capital and also taken His abode there, and Ukhi Math was the main entrance to this capital. Whatever it was, we spent a few moments with the Mohanta and left the place. The Mohanta was often asking Adityaram Babu about the Collector of Garhwal.

As at Srinagar, here too, I was disappointed. I expected to see things different in the Uttarakhand but saw actually things I never expected to see. Before entering the Uttarakhand, I anticipated that I would see many sadhus immersed in meditation everywhere, that I would see monasteries where sannyasins would be meditating or engaged in discussions on Vedanta or in serving the unfortunate people and pilgrims; but what I saw in these two monasteries was utterly disappointing. I was, therefore, greatly disillusioned. I did not see any of the things I had anticipated. I had never imagined that the Himalayas could be so grand and beautiful; that they could be so great that the very sight would purify and elevate a man to such divine heights. But, new vistas of the Himalayas opened before me one after another; all my sorrow and disappointment left me and I found myself in a domain of bliss. I was so much enchanted by the Himalayas that later, even after spending three or four years in Tibet, my desire to be in the Himalayas did not lessen.

It is in the holy precincts of Badarikashram that the Lord incarnated in the form of Nara and Narayana. It is here that they performed penance for ages. It is on account of their penance that this place has become incomparable in the entire universe. Gauri, the Mother of the Universe, was able to win over Her consort, the

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Father of the Universe, by undergoing severe austerities. Lord Krishna had asked Uddhava, the crest jewel of devotees, to reside here for meditation. The great sage Vyasa used to recite Vedic hymns along with his disciples at this very place. It seems that this place was specially meant for penance and deep meditation and that God had created this place that way. The most revered Sankaracharya erected many temples and monasteries in this area and thus made this place a centre of spiritual power. The Himalaya is regarded as the holiest of the holy places by all the scriptures, and is said to be the refuge of all the rishis, saints and acharyas devoted to meditation on the Self. Who will not be grief-stricken to see the sorry plight of these monasteries for lack of competent administration? The lofty ideas for which the great Acharya had founded these monasteries has been lost altogether. Is it not a matter of great pity for all? No one has done anything for the benefit of Sadhus in the Uttarakhand or for any other people over there. The Mohants, apart from seeing to the day-to-day worship, do nothing else. They speculate on the probable number of pilgrims arriving during the year, the amount that will be offered by them, or whether any Rajas or rich people are expected. Thus their time is spent in such worthless calculations all the six months of the year. They and the members of their families enjoy the good things offered by the pilgrims coming from distant lands. They have easy access to these gifts as they are the worshipping priests of the deities. In that hilly region things are scarce. A lump of jaggery is enough to allure any one. But the Mohants and the members of their families enjoy dainty dishes, sweets and other luxuries.

### *Sannyasins and Householders*

We have high expectations from these Mohants and inmates of monasteries. They can, in fact, surpass all

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others when it comes to matters of national benefit or of social service. What is the difference between a well-to-do householder and a sannyasin with only a loin cloth? While a well-to-do householder is expected to utilise his wealth for the benefit of others, the penniless sannyasin is expected to lay down even his life for the sake of the people. Here I do not mean the ideal householders and sannyasins of a bygone age. I am speaking of the people of the present age. A rich man, howsoever liberal he be, can at the most sacrifice his wealth for the benefit of the people. But he cannot sacrifice his very life for others. It is really hard for him to break the delicate bonds of a family life. But this is not the case with a sannyasin. No one can bind a detached sannyasin in this world of Maya. A sannyasin is a free bird having least attachment to anyone, anywhere. Yet he regards everyone in the universe as his own. Such a person alone can most naturally devote his life to the service of man with utter disregard for his perishable body. That is why I say that the Mohants can, if they so desire, serve the people with all the resources they command. They can, if they want, ask their disciples to help the poor and the needy. But what a tragedy it is that the Mohants, who should spend their hoarded wealth for the benefit of the people at large, lavishly spend on their near and dear ones only.

The Mohanta of the Ukhi Math, usually opens the temple of Kedarnath to the public on the appointed date and then returns to this place. The other routine matters in connection with the temple are conducted by his disciples and servants. It is a trying period for them to spend all the six months at Kedarnath. The cold is severe and there are many other inconveniences. So the Mohanta prefers to return to a comparatively warmer place. Although appointed as head priest of this holy shrine, the Mohanta avoids discharging his duties of serving the Lord. Even then he is the legal owner of the temple properties

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and the daily offerings. The attending priests and servants stay there ungrudingly at the behest of the Mohanta. They bathe early in the morning in the biting cold and perform the daily worship at the temple. Theirs is a miserable lot indeed! The Mohanta cares very little for them and gives them just a pittance after such hard labour. Is this not absurd?

*Wangling a blanket*

Let us turn to other matters. I spent a day at Ukhi Math in the company of Adityaram Babu very happily. Next day he was to proceed to Badrinarayana. In the course of the conversation, he told me that on his way to Kedarnath he met a very learned Maharashtrian Sannyasin, Swami Vidyananda Saraswati by name, at Chopta Chatti. He was very much impressed by his flawless Sanskrit. I, therefore, decided to go to Chopta Chatti to see the Swami. Adityaram Babu bade us farewell and left Ukhi Math a few hours after sunrise. Seeing that I did not have enough warm clothing with me, he gave me two rupees to purchase a blanket. Holding the two rupees in my hand I now began to think who would give me a blanket for this sum. As regards clothing I had only a gownlike robe (kafni) on me as I had already given the blanket which I got at Srinagar to the monk I met at Gupta-Kasi. One does not much feel the need for warm clothing while returning from Badarikashram as one does when going to Kedarnath and Badrinarayan. I was yet to reach Kedarnath and Badrinarayan. So a blanket was doubtless a necessity. I did not think the cold could be kept off which the paltry sum of two rupees in my hands. The people were needy and I could not think of asking any one of them for more money. Their own children and dependents were in need of warm clothing. Besides, a blanket for two rupees was impossible.

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I, therefore, decided to give these two rupees as an offering to the Mohanta and ask him for a blanket. I went to the Mohanta. When I entered the room the Mohanta was, it appeared, in deep meditation with eyes half closed. I dropped the two coins in the plate which was already full. Just see how powerful is the chink of silver! The Mohanta at once opened his eyes wide and cast a pleasing glance at me. On the previous day I had visited him empty-handed and had received only an indifferent look. I marked the difference. Today the Mohanta asked me a few questions. Probably he understood I was without a single paisa. I thought to myself, "Well, the two coins have already gone their way to the Mohanta. Why not ask him for a blanket?" After a while, the Mohanta realised that the two silver pieces were dropped into the ocean of his wealth not without some motive. He then asked someone to bring a blanket from the store-room and he himself gave it to me. It was a good blanket made locally, thick and well-knit. I threw the blanket over my shoulder and walked out. There was an expression of astonishment and wonder on the faces of the servants of the Mohanta and others in the town. They said to me, "Babaji, you are really great. You have extracted a blanket worth three rupees from our Mohanta!" Some said, "Had you not dropped those two rupees in the plate, you could never have got the blanket from the Mohanta." What could be a better testimony of the Mohant's generosity!

### *Return to Gupta-Kasi*

I returned to Gupta-Kasi on the same day by the same route. There is a road to Kedarnath from Ukhi Math also. But if one goes to Kedarnath first and then visits Badrinarayan, one has necessarily to by-pass Ukhi Math. Anyway, I was to come back to Ukhi Math.

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Had I taken a route other than the one from Gupta-Kasi, I would have missed a number of places I desired to see on my way to Kedarnath. So I returned to Gupta-Kasi and was pleased to see again the generous monk. He happened to be the first person I saw on returning. As soon as he saw me, he asked me to dine with him that day and spend the night at Gupta-Kasi.

## 7. TOWARDS GAURIKUND

### *With an Udasi Monk*

I had least expected to see at this place a monk I met long ago at the temple of Sarva Mangala in Kasipur. He belonged to the Udasi sect,* a sect founded by Nanak. At that time we both had resided at Burdwan for about a month. He was fond of solitude and avoided company, either of sadhus or of other people. I was quite aware of his love of solitude. I had an idea that the monk was an advanced soul. His words and conduct indicated this. I was very happy to see him again. After spending a night at Gupta-Kasi, both of us left for Kedarnath the next day.

My companion was also equally ill-equipped as regards warm clothing. He wore a cotton turban and a torn gown. He carried a blanket with innumerable holes in it. He had no other belongings. As for money, our condition was alike — neither had any. As we climbed up, the cold grew severe. I had a woollen overcoat, while he had only his torn and moth-eaten

*In the Punjab the monks mainly belong either to the Udasi or the Nirmala sects. The Nirmala sect is a cult of the Khalsa Sikhs. They regard their line of disciples as from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. These gurus are said to be Acharyas.

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blanket. So I exchanged my newly acquired blanket at Ukhi Math for his tattered one. He needed nothing more now. As for me, my robe and this tattered blanket with hundreds of holes in it, were my sole possessions throughout my journey to Tibet.

We were together when we left Gupta-Kasi but parted company at times on the way, I going ahead to enjoy the scenic beauty alone. The Udasi monk would fall back and join me later when we took shelter in some Chatti for the night.

•

*Phata Chatti*

After ascending a few miles from Gupta-Kasi we came to Phata Chatti. This chatti is comparatively a big one. There are pucca houses here. We again met the Swamiji of Phata Chatti. He gave me some food and offered fruits to my companion as he did not take any cooked food. I tasted the best Himalayan honey here. The honey had formed into crystals. There were granules in it as in pure ghee made from cow's milk. Its fragrance is indescribable. The fragrance of innumerable Himalayan flowers was concentrated, as it were, in that honey. Himalayan honey is famous and earlier I had tasted it elsewhere. But the taste of this honey at Phata Chatti was incomparable. Why should it not be so? From the foot of Kedarnath — from Gaurikunda to Gupta-Kasi and Triyugi Narayana — the entire landscape is full of fragrant flowers and they blossom all the year round. Spring never seems to leave this place. There is a canopy of creepers, shrubs and trees laden with sweet-smelling, colourful flowers and fruits. No wonder, one can get the best Himalayan honey here.

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## *Triyugi Narayana*

We left Phata Chatti and reached Triyugi Narayana. This is one of the holy shrines on the way to Kedarnath. It is two days' journey from Gupta-Kasi. As we climbed uphill from Gupta-Kasi and looked down below, we saw the entire landscape covered with a canopy of dark green foliage. Cascading streaks of waterfalls were to be seen here and there and the chirping of birds in their hundreds was heard everywhere. The temple of Triyugi Narayana is situated on a high, open and fairly level part of this region, with snow-clad ranges of the Himalayas lying all around. The upper half of these Himalayan ranges are white with snow, while the lower half is covered with the deep green cedars. The sight of these two aspects of the Himalayas — their upper heights in dazzling white, the lower regions covered in deep green and so clearly divided — threw my mind into a sublime reverie on Hara and Hari, whose gigantic forms spread before me. In prayerful meditation I saw, as it were, all the Gods and Goddesses merged in the mightiest mountain of the world. That is why the great poet Kalidasa writes in praise: "The divinity that is Himalaya — the King of mountains — the measuring rod of the earth." No one else has described the grandeur of the Himalaya in better words.

## *The Perennial Sacrificial Pit*

The temple of Triyugi Narayana is built of black polished stone. There is a perennial fire in a Vedic Altar (Homa Kund) outside the temple. It is said that the fire in this Kund has been burning for the last three *Yugus*. Logs of wood are constantly thrown in to keep the fire burning. It was a wonder to me to see this fire kept alight from so distant a time, enabling tired and

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weary pilgrims and devotees to warm themselves. The township is also called Triyugi Narayana after the main shrine here. It is a fairly populous town. Most of the residents are priests (*Pandas*) or pujaris of the temple. They subsist mainly on the donations and offerings of pilgrims. The pilgrim season continues for about six months. The *Pandas* have no other source of income in this severely cold region of strong winds, cloudy skies and heavy snowfall. It is almost inaccessible during the long winter. I took a few dips in the cold, crystal clear water of the reservoir and then came to the blazing *Kund*. I applied some of the ashes of the sacred fire of hoary ages upon my body. I felt a sudden joy spring up within me. The blazing fire is really a boon to shivering pilgrims from the plains who sit around it. I said to myself, "See how the Lord, who loves His devotees, has specially kept this fire burning all these ages. How mindful is He of the comforts of the devotees!"

### *Himalaya the Awakener*

As far as I remember, I spent only two nights at Triyugi Narayana. On the third day I proceeded to Gaurikund. Kedarnath is about 12 miles (20 kilo meters) from Gaurikund. It is a steep ascent and there is no Chatti on the way. I thought that I would find it difficult to negotiate such a steep climb. It is true that I crossed over many mountain ranges after leaving Mussouri but I did not experience any fatigue at any time. Beautiful vistas always opened before me and I never felt the rigours of the journey. Before embarking on my journey of the Uttarakhand, one well-informed Sadhu had told me in Ayodhya that although Badarikashrama is a great and holy pilgrim spot, the strain of the journey across the mountains has a depressing effect on a lukewarm pilgrim. The painful journey by that awful route is enough to

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destroy all fine sentiments and faith one has in that holy place. I did not experience any of these difficulties and hardships during any of my three trips to Tibet. The moment I entered the Himalayan regions I had an altogether refreshing experience. As I proceeded further into the Himalayas, my desire to reach the very heart of this celestial region grew stronger. I would experience an indescribable joy when I contemplated on the divine nature of the Himalayas. I would long for still more beautiful sights of this holy mountainous land. This insatiable curiosity would goad me on further beyond the lofty peaks. New horizons kept unrolling before me and as I advanced, newer ranges kept drawing me on. I was so much inspired by the grandeur of these holy peaks that I never felt tired or dejected. Every step used to infuse in me faith, courage and enthusiasm.

### *At the holy confluence*

So I was on my way to Gaurikunda from Triyugi Narayana enjoying these beautiful sights in the holy Himalayas. On the way I saw a beautiful confluence of the rivers Mandakini and Kali-Ganga. The waters of the Kali-Ganga were attractively blue. How significant was the attribute 'Kali' given to this river! I took a dip in the confluence after which I felt a sense of perfect peace. A little rest restored my strength. Mandakini and Kali-Ganga — the two daughters of the Himalaya — are, as if, roaming about in the domain of their loving father. They, perhaps, left the jewel-studded palace of their father and after going through the many forests and glades met here in a sisterly embrace. Kalindi, or Jumna, their elder sister, has perhaps left the loving company of the twin sisters and the affectionate parental home to travel in distant lands to fulfil some divine purpose.

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*The Descent of the Daughters*

All the daughters of the King of Mountains — the Bhagirathi Ganga, the holiest of the holy, the Jumna, Mandakini and Alakananda — are constantly running ahead. They take along with them all smaller streams and rivulets on the way and reach their maturity. At places they rush on straight ahead and at others they take sudden bends. Their breasts swell with innumerable ripples and waves, probably to keep their varied divine emotions secret. In some places they sing the various age-old melodies; in others, they dance to the rythmic beating of their waves. Thus they break the utter silence about them as they go along singing the praises of the Lord. All these activities of theirs transport the devotees to a region of heavenly bliss. Again at certain spots these rivers, with their terrible eddies and strong currents, threaten, as if, to flood the entire world, and send it deep into the depths of hell. The boom of their thundering waters is heard afar. Their teeth, as powerful as the thunderbolt, break through mountains of granite. They hurl themselves from the loftiest mountains down into the valleys below and fill with awe the minds of their devotees. They simulate the dance of destruction of Siva, only to withdraw again their fearful appearance and become smooth-flowing currents of clear water. At times they fall with thundering noise on rocks below and then again flow on, calm and docile, spreading happiness all around with their bright smiles. Verily they are mothers as with outstretched arms they embrace thirsting humanity. Their waters verily nourish India's vast crores living in the plains. On their way down they visit the holy places of ancient sages, sometimes making holy new spots by their very visits. They also increase the holiness of ashramas of earlier saints, make them more fruitful and prosperous. They also water the trees, vines and cre-

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epers, and help them bear flowers and fruits in abundance. It seems that the turbulence of these rivers appears no more after having washed the feet of the great ashramas. At places these rivers produce sweet musical notes in accompaniment of the chant of Vedic hymns by sages on their banks. Their waters seem to linger there for a while, unwilling perhaps to leave these holy hermitages. Here and there rocky soils are made soft and fertile to produce food and fruits in abundance. They cast an iridescent mantle bedecked with colourful, fragrant flowers and velvety moss on the rough and rocky body of father Himalaya. They perhaps want to suggest that the rough and hard outer form of the Himalaya is not his true self. Imagine the depth, the softness and the richness of the heart of one who is the father of the most compassionate Gauri, the pure Ganga and all-loving Jamuna. Possibly the Himalaya has well hidden his heart in the innermost core of his rocky mountainous body so that it should not come in the range of a mortal's eye.

All these daughters of the Himalaya, who are great rivers, are trying their best to soften and enliven the seemingly hard-crusted and outwardly rocky body of the king of the mountains. After doing this job, they merge completely in the Ganga one by one. The primordial energy, having been divided hundredfold, once again merges into unity.

### *The Life-Purpose of Jamuna*

All these rivers which flow through Uttar Khand have added to the all-round beauty and grandeur of the Himalayas. They all jump into Bhagirathi only after fulfilling this duty. The Ganga and the Jamuna, both have descended from the heavens and run across the entire breadth of this country — appeasing crores of

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people with their cool touch. These two rivers springing from different places and flowing playfully a long distance, came to a place where they were destined to fulfil their life's purpose. The Ganga, through whom one could get to heaven, was desirous of sanctifying the sons of Sagara, and ran to the eastern sea bestowing happiness on one and all. The Kalindi or Jamuna also ran past Brindavana as if to participate in the Braja Lila of Lord Krishna. Just as the Gopis were drawn to the divine and celestial music of Krishna's flute, Jamuna also was as though irresistibly drawn to Braja and so left behind her parental home and all her dear sisters. The Jamuna, born out of the pure white snow of the Himalayas, assumed the darker shade so that she may identify herself with Lord Krishna and worship Him. Or, perhaps, she did not want to be identified, while in the deep embrace of her Lord. It may be that Lord Krishna hid Himself in her heart and His bluish tinge penetrated her crystal clear heart. Possibly she had decided to quench the burning fire in the hearts of the Gopis, who constantly yearned to unite with Lord Krishna. That is why the Jamuna is being called 'Tapa Samani' i.e. one who quenches the heat. It may be that the Jamuna wanted that the Gopis would take delight in looking at her dark waters and thereby remember their Beloved Master of azure hue. Or, perhaps, the Jamuna must have thought of fulfilling her life's mission of embracing the Gopis of Braja and that is why she came all alone to this place. Just as the Braja Gopis abandoned the embrace of the husbands and loving children, and also other near and dear ones, being attracted by the sweet tunes of the flute of Krishna, and rushed on one moonlit night to see and embrace Him, so also Jamuna lost herself when she heard the melodious notes of Krishna's flute, and she turned towards Braja. Like an aristocratic lady who spends all her time in the inner precincts of a palace, the Jamuna was hitherto moving only in the forests and

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glades. But now she rushed to Braja disregarding all her aristocracy. Her sister Jahnavi (Ganga) had to experience separation from her. The Jamuna merged in the joy of uttering The Lord's name and was as if being bathed in the tears of love gushing from the lotus-like eyes of the Gopis. Jamuna verily floods the land with the nectar of devotion. A similar flood of devotion, in the form of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu had once drenched the entire holy land of Bengal. Seeing the mighty blue wave of the ocean, Mahaprabhu entered into samadhi. Can you imagine the upheaval in his heart, when the sweet name of Jamuna might have been uttered in his presence?

When I see the pure rushing water of the celestial Ganga and Jamuna, innumerable happy memories revive in my mind. Throughout the ages, great events and episodes have taken place on the holy banks of these two rivers. It is worthwhile to remember those events. I can say with confidence that whatever has been done in the past on the banks of these two rivers, has no parallel in the history of the world. These two rivers have been rightly eulogised in our scriptures. The various sciences formulated by the ancient sages can be verified even to-day. The banks of the Ganga and the Jamuna echo and re-echo the ancient message of truth and love. The Lord manifested Himself more than once on the banks of these great rivers, inundating thereby the entire land with love. There is no parallel to this. Who can count the number of civilisations which arose and perished on the banks of these eternal rivers?

The Jamuna who could break through the solid mountainous rocks, melted with compassion and she enriched this motherland of ours with abundant green fields. The prosperity which she conferred on this land was a matter of amazement for the entire world. The Jamuna has shown the world that this land had a great and glorious tradition. Maybe that Jamuna's waters

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turned dark as she remembered with agony the past glory of this land. It seems that she cut short her mundane existence at Prayag, after embracing her sister and telling her the glorious past and the ignominious present of this land. I have so far narrated the earlier and later life of Jamuna on this earth. Now I intend to describe the variety of holy places along the length of her course.

The confluences which I had seen from Haridwar to Badarikashram were all great and glorious, and they abounded in natural beauty. As I remember them, a host of holy men, merged in tapasya, stand before my mental eye. But the glory of Prayag — the holiest of the holy confluences of the Ganga and Jamuna — is beyond my description. It is the culmination of what is best in Indian culture. When I think of Prayag, vistas of the glorious past unfold themselves before my eyes. It is not possible to put down all the thoughts that rush into my mind. The Jamuna has her own personality. Her story cannot be completed without describing this confluence in detail.

## 8 MUSINGS ON THE GLORY THAT IS PRAYAG

*A Diversion*

It is always worthwhile to investigate thoroughly any phenomenon which appears meaningful to you. I am following the same rule here. I have narrated the story of the early sauntering of Jamuna and now I shall have a mental ride to Prayag where Jamuna merges in the Ganga. I shall first elucidate the significance of this place and then shall return to the journey to Kedarnath. The Ganga will flow on and on beyond Prayag towards

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the ocean. But I am not going to describe her subsequent course. I simply want to emphasize briefly the sanctity and importance of the heavenly confluence of the Ganga and the Jamuna.

### *Prayag, the Holy of the Holies*

There are about seven such confluences in between the northern end of Uttarakhanda and Prayag —the holiest of the holy places. All these confluences have been described elaborately in most of the Puranas. To the Hindus Prayag is the holiest spot. It is here that the Hindus are liberated from the cycle of births and deaths. That is to say, they attain liberation. The scriptures highly eulogize Prayag. There is no spot on this earth as holy as Prayag. I shall quote here two couplets from Matsya Purana in testimony of what I say.

श्रुतिः प्रमाणं स्मृतयः प्रमाणं पुराणमप्यत्र परं प्रमाणम् ।
यत्रास्ति गंगा यमुना प्रमाणं स तीर्थराजो जयति प्रयागः ।।
न यत्र योगाचरणप्रतोक्षा न यत्र यज्ञेष्टिविशिष्ट दीक्षा ।
न तारकातानगुरोरपेक्षा स तीर्थराजो जयति प्रयागः ।।

These couplets show how Prayag is looked upon with reverence and faith by all the Hindus. Where is the necessity of citing the Srutis, Smritis and the Puranas when the Ganga and Jamuna themselves corroborate the sanctity of this holy place? The mere fact that the Ganga and Jamuna have met here is enough to convince anyone about the sacredness of this place. The efficacy of this place does not depend on anyone's performing penance here, or on performing yoga, or on special initiation for fire sacrifice. There is no necessity of even mystic initiation by a Guru who would usher one into the realm of knowledge of the Absolute. The Hindus have inculcated in their lives the

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glory and greatness of Prayag. There are a number of events in history which confirm these beliefs. The unique glory of Prayag is a living reality for all the Hindus. The ancient sages were so much overwhelmed with its sanctity, that they have stated without any reservation — "One should give up one's life after coming to the confluence of Ganga and Jamuna." Remember that these very ancient sages had regarded suicide as the worst sin. But it is they who enjoin the giving up of one's life in the holy confluence here. It is true that all men will not be able to comprehend the feelings which rush to the minds of devout Hindus when they first see this confluence. But let them not doubt the glorious and inspiring history of this place.

This holy place of Prayag is verily the land of two opposite forces, viz., of activity and of serenity. These two forces of work and meditation have been existing here since ages. Prayag is the bestower of worldly glory and eternal peace. Prayag is the Wish-fulfilling tree, as it were, for those who desire mundane glory; and Prayag is the Guru who gives liberation to those who hanker after it. Prayag is discharging this duty since time immemorial. Prayag has seen and has shown the highest worldly glory. Prayag has also manifested the eternal glory of Brahman. By combining these two extremely opposite human objectives, Prayag has made this city the holiest spot on earth. I have not been so much moved by any other holy place so far. The more I think about it, the more I fall in love with it.

### *The luminaries of Prayag*

Pururavas, the son of Budha, ruled in this city. The city vied with Amaravati, the capital of Indra. The king used to sit at leisure on the highest terrace of his palace and the moon rays of his grace and glory used to flood the entire city. The chakora birds used to throng in the

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gardens where the king used to play. All the seven heavens could not surpass this city in grandeur. Urvasi, who had to abandon her heavenly abode, came here and adored Pururavas. Think of the heavenly joys which must have thrilled this very city and, again, think of the remorse of this city when she returned to heaven leaving Pururavas all alone. I think Pururavas had incurred the hatred of the gods purposely to show to them the excellence of this city in both — *pravrtti* and *nivritti* (desire and cessation of it). King Pururavas had verily made this city a heaven by his rich and active life.

Again it was here that the sage Bharadwaja stayed surrounded by his innumerable disciples, all resplendent with the power of Brahmacharya. The sage, meditating on the divine, discovered new spiritual truths. It was here, that Rama, accompanied by Janaki, stayed for a night after giving up the royal palace. They appeased their hunger with the fruits and roots in the forest adjoining this place. Imagine the serenity of this place then. It is beyond my power of description to express the joys of those thousands of thinking men who might have derived immense joy in the pursuit of the Atman. Bharata accompanied by the residents of Ayodhya had arrived here to meet Rama. The sage Bharadwaja played the role of a host and with a wink created here all the comforts of a palace for Bharata and the residents of Ayodhya. All of them came to know of the glory of Prayag on that occasion.

### *The Chinese Tribute*

It was here in Prayag that the king of Kanyakubja, Siladitya Harshavardhana performed the great sacrifice lasting for five years. It was here that, on the eve of the valedictory function of this great sacrifice, Harshavardhana distributed all his wealth among his subjects.

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It was at this time again that people became aware of the great glory of Prayag. Even during the age of Buddha, the glory of Prayag did not diminish. Harshavardhana had chosen Prayag as the venue of his biggest sacrifice. All the great sacrifices during his regime were performed in Prayag. Siladitya Harshavardhana had specially invited the Chinese pilgrim Huentsang who has faithfully recorded the events at this sacrifice. From his records we know of the glorious sacrifices of that age. The record indicates the huge wealth amassed and distributed by this great king. Such a huge sacrifice of wealth is possible only in Prayag. Huentsang has written that only weapons of war were left with the king and all other belongings were freely distributed among his entire subjects. Even the royal costumes and ornaments were given away. Harhsavardhana, the king of Kanyakubja, thus impoverished himself on six or seven occasions. Glory be to you, Oh Harshavardhana! It was for the amelioration of the needy that you were born. It was you who had established the great ideal of sacrifice for this great land. The very land has lost that glory today.

It was due to the unprecedented personal sacrifice on the part of the Chinese traveller Huentsang that we could have a record of those glorious moments. No one, except those who are bent on tarnishing the image of this nation, would dare to contradict this glorious past. Who can measure the greatness of this place — a place sanctified by the innumerable sacrifices of the great Hindu and Buddhist kings! Today this nation has been utterly impoverished, but yet, it stands as a testimony to the great and glorious sacrifices in the past, held at Prayag. *Dana* has its own efficacy. That is why people from all over the country come here all the way, donate liberally and make offerings to the manes. The confluence of the Ganga and Jamuna is the main source of the glory of this place. This is not a simple confluence of the two rivers.

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It is the union of two big forces. This has made this place all the more glorious.

### *Seed-bed of Vedanta*

Let us consider some other historical events which might have led to the glorification of this place. Buddhism ruled supreme for a long period in India. But at the time of its decadence, Kumarila Bhatta arose on the horizon and he performed his life's mission here. In the last phase of his life, he came to Prayag and chose to give up his body, in the presence of the great Sankaracharya, by burning it in a heap of husk. Why should he have come here for this purpose? Were there not other places to give up his body? Surely he was drawn by the holiest confluence of the Ganga and Jamuna. Kumarila Bhatta represented the path of rituals (*Karmakanda*) and Sankaracharya represented the path of knowledge (*Jnanakanda*). The end of *Karmakanda* and the rise of *Jnanakanda* — both these events took place in Prayag. Kumarila Bhatta bade Acarya Sankara to proceed from this very place for his all-India conquest. It was in obeisance to Bhatta that Sankaracharya commenced his journey and came and stood before Mandana Misra — the chief disciple of Bhatta. Bhatta, who was the rejuvenator of the Vedic lore and ritual, abandoned his body and merged in the spirit of Acharya Sankara. Similarly, his main disciple, Mandana Misra, had his lore and logic burnt to ashes in the fire of knowledge. The glorious Sun of the *Advaita Vedanta* arose on the horizon of Bharata in the form of Acharya Sankara. This sun of knowledge removed the darkness of ignorance. All the various subsects and their philosophies were nowhere after the rise of Acharya Sankara. So it was here that the Sun of Vedanta rose in India's firmament. With Kumarila Bhatta, the epoch of Vedic ritual (*Karmakanda*) ended, and the epoch of knowledge emerged in Prayag. This is the

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relationship of Holy Prayag with the revival of the Vedanta philosophy in India. The Jamuna stands for *Pravrtti*, or motive force, and the Ganga stands for *Nivrtti*, the cessation of all desire and activities. *Pravrtti* in the form of Jamuna meets here with *Nivrtti* in the form of the Ganga. The religion of rituals merges here in the religion based on eternal truth and knowledge.

As we ruminate over the glory of this place, we realise that it was here that the seedling of Vedanta developed into a big banyan tree. It sheltered Hinduism under its cool shade. It is a fact of history that Prayag was the cradle of Vedanta. It was from here that the lion of Vedanta first set out for a world conquest.

### *Lose the body to find the Self*

Kumarila Bhatta gave up his life in this holy city with a feeling of self-fulfilment. Others followed suit. Every Hindu desires to lay down his life in this holy city. This indicates how the Hindu mind is pure and refined. The sacred *Puranas* also reveal that the custom of laying down one's life is very ancient and time-honoured. Huentsang had seen the heaps of bones of those who had come here during the innumerable past ages only to die. I know that this practice of self-annihilation will be branded as a wild and uncivilised custom by those Westerners who have no desire to delve deep into the spirit of Hinduism. The scriptures state that, "Those who bathe here go to heaven. Those who die here are not born again." This shows that the ancient Hindus never hesitated in discarding this mortal body in the holy precincts of Prayag.

The scriptures of the Aryans have all along denounced suicide. But the same scriptures enjoin the casting away of the body in the holy confluence of Prayag. These apparently conflicting views need to be under-

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stood in their proper context. There are many who do not care to understand the spirit behind this apparent conflict. Those who have had a smattering of English learning, think that the British have laid the Indians under a great obligation by putting a stop to some of their age-old customs. But these anglicised Indians, who do not understand their ancient heritage, are in fact self-destroyers. They do not know how deep was the knowledge of ancient sages, about birth and death, ethics and nonethics. They had solved the riddle of the universe. Would they ever enjoin suicide? What is done in Prayag is no suicide. It is the highest sacrifice a man can perform in this mundane world. Those who do not have any capacity to understand the sublime realities of life can alone brand that action as suicide. Those only misunderstand the religious injunctions of the Hindus, who do not have any capacity to understand Hinduism in its totality.

### *The Eternity of Indian Culture*

There has been great warrior kings who have, either to grab others' territories or to defend their own throne, shed the blood of innumerable innocent persons. None of them nourished human culture by the sacrifice of his own life. On the other hand, the peace-loving Hindus have sacrificed everything, including their own precious lives, for the sake of their religion. This sacrifice has not gone in vain. It has generated a tremendous power to sustain the Indian culture throughout the ages. The civilised world to-day knows this. Today we may be weak, poor and under foreign subjection, but we can say with confidence that we have inherited that great immortal culture so beautifully evolved by our ancient realised souls. No other nation in the world can claim such a rich heritage. Those nations who had once excelled in military power and in the art of warfare are no more

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extant, while we, dispite our centuries-old subjugation, still wax strong with spiritual knowledge — the knowledge passed on to us by the ancient sages. Our society is still well integrated and intact. None could break it so far.

### *Shuffling off the Mortal coil*

On one occasion, while going to Gangotri, I saw a Sadhu, who was so much overwhelmed with the sight of the holiest of the holy rivers, Bhagirathi, that he ended his mundane existence by throwing himself headlong into the swiftly flowing river below. Can anyone describe the feelings which might have been experienced by the Sadhu on that occasion? Who can decide whether the Sadhu went to heaven or elsewhere? I can, however, say with confidence that in the fearless end of this Sadhu, death itself had died. The Hindus are reluctant to call such a sacrifice a painful death. On the contrary, this is the way to show that the human body is a fabric which can be torn off any moment, and that the soul is ever immortal. How great this Sadhu was! In this easy death he showed the entire world that man can verily become immortal by casting away this human frame in moments of highest devotion. In India, we often come across men who abandon this body by starving. They do this wilfully and as a part of religious discipline. The practice is ancient but it is still prevalent. No one can count the number of such voluntary deaths on the way to Kedarnath. There are innumerable spots on that holy path, where the Sadhus in their ecstasy, throw off their insignificant bundles of bones across the valleys. These are known as Bhrgupatanas. Heaps of their bones can be found everywhere in the Himalayas. They stand as testimony to the conquest of death by the Hindus. Many others would dig a hole in the earth and bury themselves there. This only indicates that the Hindus, charged

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with a sublime feeling, utterly disregard the body of flesh and blood. The British, with their strict laws, could not so far put an end to this practice of embracing death. Even today no one can prevent a Sadhu from giving up his body by fasting. A devoted woman can very well give up her body after the death of her husband, even if her near and dear ones do not agree with her. She has her own means of fulfilling her highest desire.

Ethnologists may try to investigate the source of this custom of embracing death voluntarily. They will not be able to say that the custom is barbarous. The custom springs from the highest cultural ideals. Of course, those who commit suicide out of sheer dejection or disgust with life, or those who cannot cope up with their social obligations and thus prefer death, are not glorified by the Hindus. They are said to be most sinful and no one would offer obsequies for them.

*Ganges, Brahman in flow*

The Hindu tradition speaks of a sacrifice of one's own son to propitiate the guest. The Hindu parents do this with a cheerful face. A Hindu may be starving for days together, but when it comes to entertaining a guest, he will do anything to please him. He will even smilingly embrace death, if that shouid please the guest. The Hindus regard this as a great ideal. The sublime thought behind this ideal cannot be appreciated by those who place temporary mundane pleasures above everything. Such men have no moral fibre in them. They do not value Self-knowledge. They have no faith in renunciation and sacrifice. Those who are in the mire of Maya and who are afraid of death will regard self-abnegation as an uncivilised trait. But here lies the greatness of the Hindu race and the Hindu culture. How can other people appreciate the feelings of a real Hindu, looking at the

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mother Ganga? The sanctity of the Ganga can never be appreciated by non-Hindus. The mere thoughts about Ganga are enough to vibrate the strings of a Hindu heart. A dip in the waters of the Ganga are quite efficacious in cleansing the soul of a Hindu and making him free from all the bondages of sin and infatuation. The ancient sages have written a lot about Ganga in the scriptures. Ganga is regarded as the liquid form of Siva — *sambhorambhomayi murti*' — as is rightly described by Kalidasa. Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna used to say, "Gangavari Brahmavari": that is, Ganga water is Brahman in the form of water. Every Hindu yearns to die one day on her banks. She is regarded as a ladder to heaven. The materialists will not be able to appreciate all the efficient attributes of the Ganga. Those who treat Ganga as an ordinary water-course will regard the self-surrender of the Hindus in her lap as outright madness. But the true Hindus will not say so. For them the Ganga is as holy — '*Sarva tirthamayi ganga*' — as she was ages ago. There are men even today who would throw themselves in the Ganga by saying — '*Ante ganga narayana, brahma*'. At the last stage of life, Ganga is the Narayana, Ganga is the Brahman.

### *The Final Sacrifice*

There is nothing in this world which one cannot offer to one's esteemed deity. Nowhere in the world will you find a similar sacrifice. The Aryans never hesitated in sacrificing their highest possession, viz., their body.

When a devoted Hindu sees a temple or a holy place, he at once remembers the Creator and the insignificance of the human body comes to his mind. In such a blissful moment if his body drops dead, he deems it as his greatest achievement. Such a cessation of life gives him the highest joy.

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Everyone among the Hindus, young or old, knows that the soul is deathless. That is why this Aryan race in this part of the world, never fears death. Just as a snake discards his slough, a Hindu discards his body. He assumes another body in the next birth. So, such a being feels no qualms in abandoning the body in realising a great ideal. He would do anything to worship his esteemed deity, or to perform a sacrifice, or to serve humanity or, for that matter, any living creature. For such a person it is not difficult to give up his body at the holy pilgrim spot or at the sight of ecstatic natural beauty. There are many historical events to corroborate this.

During the Muslim rule, the Aryan womenfolk used to embrace death to maintain their religion and their chastity. Is this not a proof of their fearlessness? Women, who are by nature very tender-hearted, could shake off the fear of death. The materialistic West will never understand this characteristic of the oriental women. They always brand the Indians as uncultured. They go on destroying whatever the Hindus hold in high esteem. This harsh and rough treatment by the rulers has made these people more stubborn. The practice of voluntary death still continues. They still practise it and point the way to the civilised world. The Indians may have lost their political freedom. But they still can lead the world in spiritual matters. India liberally squanders her spiritual wealth. The Western world should be grateful to India for her spiritual contribution. It is true that under the British rule, the practice of Suttee has been abolished. This has rightly put a stop to undesirable coercion in certain cases. But even now, no power on earth can prevent a chaste and devoted wife from throwing herself in the flames of her departed husband's pyre.

The frequent foreign invasions degenerated the Indian race and the Indian society became utterly superstitious. In the matter of certain voluntary reli-

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gious practices, social coercion prevailed. That is why the practice of Suttee came to gather disrepute and began to be regarded as a social evil. It was on this account that the great and ancient Hindu society with a rich culture, later on, came to be looked upon as the most uncivilised society in the world.

No other society in the world, however, has a practice of abandoning the human body by merging in the divine thought. The Chinese pilgrim Huentsang has recorded that India was the most developed nation in the world. No nation surpassed India in the matter of knowledge, technology and wealth. Had it not been so, he would not have come here from his motherland which could boast of an ancient civilisation. Consider the hardship he would have suffered. Can we say that India was uncivilised when Huentsang came here and noticed the practice of self-annihilation? Can we say that India is more civilised now when that practice appears to have been abolished after the spread of English learning in this land?

Now, no one will force a widow to burn herself alive on the pyre of her deceased husband. No one will give up his body in sheer joy of meeting his most beloved deity. No one will throw himself headlong in the holy confluence at Prayag. Why then is the rate of suicide on the increase nowadays? There are many who would kill themselves by hanging or by swallowing poisonous drugs, and all this for some petty quarrel with someone in the home. The men of bygone days were not so petty and foolish.

### *Pravritti and Nivritti*

Prayag is really a great pilgrim spot. This is a place which has witnessed innumerable events in the past and all these events now crowd in my memory. It is beyond

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my capacity to write down all those historical happenings in this short account. The place continues to be equally great even today. You will not find here the ancient glory now, but as regards the holiness, Prayag continues to be equally holy and esteemed. The ripples on the holy waters, the Ganga and the Jamuna, can still infuse great strength in men and women. From the moment this land was drenched with the first flow of the Ganga and the Jamuna, it continues to inspire people in great works. It is due to the meeting of the two great rivers that things prosper better in Prayag. Jamuna symbolises Apara Vidya while Bhagirathi symbolises Para Vidya. Jamuna was the playmate of Lord Krishna. So the moment one sees her, one is inspired with a feeling of devotion. The sight of the Bhagirathi, however, extinguishes all the worldly desires of a pilgrim. Both the rivers perform their functions most efficiently. The Bhagirathi makes one conscious of one's last day on the earth and inspires dispassion in him. The Jamuna makes even the most detached person desirous of seeing Bhagavan Krishna.

Both these rivers excel in their divine attributes. It is their strength which sustains Prayag. Prayag is not only a confluence of rivers but it is a meeting place of opposites — extreme enjoyment and great renunciation. The Jamuna has cast all her treasures on her banks at Prayag and has merged herself in the Ganga. She continues to sing the glories of Ganga.

When we think of the divine creation, we come to the conclusion that nothing in this universe has been conceived without any purpose. The created thing fulfils its purpose and the universe continues to function. So, when the slightest event in the universe is not without a purpose, how can the confluence of the Ganga and the Jamuna be purposeless?. That is why I decided to deal in such great detail with Prayag. That is why I have

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said that, for the Hindus, a holy place functions as a power house. All do not have the capacity to appreciate the glorious spirituality and the exemplary character of the Hindus. The foreign religious missionaries indulge in mud slinging and do not carry home a correct picture of the Hindus. The ancient Aryans were not savages. None of their customs were those of savages. I had to digress a little, and mention all these things.

Let us now put on our forehead a few particles of dust from Prayag and proceed to the confluence of the Mandakini and the Kali-Ganga.

## 9. GOWRIKUNDA

*In the holy Confluence*

In the morning I had a number of dips in that beautiful and holy confluence and then proceeded to Gaurikunda. Gaurikunda is beyond Gupta-Kasi and Triyugi Narayana. It is on the way to Kedarnath. It is a well known holy place. When they leave Triyugi Narayana, the pilgrims become anxious to visit Gaurikunda. If one reaches Gaurikunda, it is as good as having reached Kedarnath. The pilgrims are also anxious to take bath in the hot springs here. The cold at Kedarnath is very severe. It is, therefore, natural that pilgrims should at once feel happy at the prospect of reaching Gaurikunda. As I was heading towards Gaurikunda, I saw the Himalaya in an altogether new form. It was, as if, the Himalaya was changing his attire. When I glanced over the ranges before me, I marked a change. As I ascended the path to Gaurikunda and looked around me, I saw that the great mountain was as if stripping off his garments one by one and was

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hugging me lovingly to his side. This was an altogether different domain of Kedarnath. It is beyond my power of expression to describe the Himalaya which I was seeing now from so near. I thought to myself that if the sights near about Kedarnath are so enchanting, how magnificent would be the very precincts of the holy shrine of Kedarnath? What a tremendous impact would they make on me? Musing like this, I arrived at Gaurikunda in the afternoon.

Gaurikunda is on a somewhat narrow rock surrounded by the summits of the mountain covered with colourful foliage. The leaves are covered with snow. Gaurikunda is always moist with the cool spray of the rushing currents of the Mandakini. A most beautiful image of Gauri adorns the temple. The base of the temple is washed by the waters of the Mandakini, which appears to have calmed down a little while laving the temple of Gauri. At other places, the water is turbulent and the noise is great. But here there is just a rippling sound and one may say that Mandakini is quickly muttering the eulogies of Gauri. There is one hot water spring. This holy place has become all the more pleasant with this spring. The pilgrims from distant places are comforted by this spring and they get strength to bear the severe cold of Kedarnath. The water of the spring has been channelled and it falls with a gurgling noise in one stone-built tank. This tank is known as Gaurikunda. The hot water current flows continuously into the ice cool water of the Mandakini. The water of the hot spring contains sulphur, and several dips in the Gaurikunda can cure a person of skin diseases. I did not come across any such hot spring on the way to Kedarnath. In this snow-covered area, the winds blow continuously and the cold is piercing. But a dip in the hot spring is most refreshing for all the pilgrims. For a while they forget this unbearable cold.

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*The last Settlement*

I arrived at Gaurikunda. The place was overcrowded with pilgrims from all parts of India. The hubhub of the pilgrims and the bubbling noise of the divine Mandakini mingled into an enchanting humming sound. The entire atmosphere was resounding with that note. On my way to Kedarnath, I had seen only three places which were as beautiful as this. They were Agastyamuni, Gupta-Kasi and Triyugi Narayana. There are many shops here. Pilgrims get all the provisions in these shops, such as pulses, rice, etc. There is enough residential accommodation also. This is the final resting place on the way to Kedarnath. Save the temple of Kedarnath, there is no pucca construction of temples or houses beyond this place. During winter it snows hard here, and so nobody stays in Gaurikunda during that period. The residents of Gaurikunda move then to the nearby villages.

*Gauri enchants Sankara*

Gaurikunda is not only famous for its scenic beauty but is also associated with innumerable historic events. The same history is shared by the lofty rocks of Kedarnath. I moved in this area continuously for four years and have frequented a few inaccessible places. From what I have heard from people belonging to this area I can say that this is the place where Hara and Parvati once dwelt. Even now one feels the very air here charged with their divine presence. That is why the place is so great and glorious. This may be treated as a special palace of King Siva — the Sambhuraj. So this place ranks very high among all the tirthas in Uttarakhanda. This is the reason why the place enchants you so easily.

Let us study as to how Gaurikunda became so famous. The scenic beauty and the pleasant atmosphere

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make an impact on your mind and you conclude that this is the best spot for *tapasya*. Gauri, the daughter of Giri Raj Himalaya, is the presiding deity of this place since time immemorial. The place is, therefore, known after her. The very sight of this beautiful place heightened my spirits so much that I could not imagine as to what my condition would have been, had I tried to see all the holy places in the vicinity. I believe that Mahamaya, the Primordial Power, had created this place for Her own *tapasya* and equipped it with all the necessary things. Uma, the daughter of the King of Mountains, performed her hard penance in this region and won over Sadasiva, who had forgotten everything in meditation. The Mother of the Universe united with Siva in this spot to oblige all the gods, and charmed all the people of the world. A number of relics in this connection can be traced here. I have no doubt that this is the very spot where Siva was pleased at the service offered to Him by Parvati. When we glance at the grandeur of this place, we begin to feel that this is a second Kailasa. To me it seems that the Father of the Universe, Sadasiva left Kailasa and made this place His abode. This was so because the birth place of Parvati was very near this place and the chief city in the domain of the Himalaya was here. After having reached this place, Sankara also merged in Samadhi. Or possibly, Sankara was drawn by the loving treatment of His in-laws and He decided to come and stay here. While He was deep in meditation, Madana, the God of love darted his arrows at Him. Sankara reduced Madana to ashes. Uma came back as advised by the elders and she commenced severe penance at Gauri Sankara — a place in the vicinity of Gaurikunda. We come across beautiful description of Gauri Sankara in Puranas and also in *Kumarasambhava*, an epic poem by Kalidasa. Places round about Gauri Sankara can be identified from the descriptions in the Puranas and *Kumarasambhava*. Kedarkhand is the holiest place in the whole

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of Uttarakhand. I do not think that this needs any corroboration.

This place is holy because Gauri, the Mother of the universe performed Her *tapsya* here. It is true that the entire Himalayan range is holy and beautiful. But the grandeur of Kedarnath is altogether different. This region of Kedarnath is an outburst of the divine will. God has lavishly spent all His treasures in the creation of this region. It was here that Uma had won over Mahakala Rudra (Siva) by Her most severe austerities. Lost in meditation Siva, the crest jewel of the Yogis, was moved to the quick by Uma's austerities. It was here that Sadasiva, who has the moon on His crest, assumed the form of a Brahmacharin and blasphemed Siva in the presence of Uma and then revealing His identity, fulfilled Mahamaya's desire. I do not have the capacity to describe the unique characteristics of this holy spot, which had been the resort of Uma and Sankara. I am however trying to note down my feelings in this regard. I have explicit faith in the divine presence and for the moment thousands of devotional feelings are rushing to my mind.

The landscape from Gaurikunda to Kedarnath is strange and beautiful. Indeed, I lack the requisite penmanship to capture that beauty.

A single night's stay in Gaurikunda was not enough. I wanted to stay on. But the desire to reach Kedarnath was equally great. So next morning I got up early and proceeded to Kedarnath. The Udasi Sadhu was with me. Sometimes he preceded and sometimes he followed me. This had been going on for days together so far. But mostly we used to stay in the same place, and then we used to talk.

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## 10. KEDARNATH

### *The ascent to Kedarnath*

The Kedarnath temple is approximately 6 kosa (about 10 kilo metres) from Gaurikund. The way is one of continuous ascent of a high gradient, but goes along a zigzag mountain path. As we march ahead we feel that at every turn we are elevated. The cold in the atmosphere increased as I gradually came near the temple. A sight, which I had never seen before and had never hoped to see was unfolding itself before me. I forgot all the sorrows of the mortal world as beautiful Nature unfolded her glorious form before me.

Oh! How beautiful — simply indescribable! Tree tops covered with green foliage. The bursting of innumerable flowers. Saturation of the atmosphere with the heavenly fragrance. The soft and low buzzing of the bees. The cool and fragrant breeze blowing all round. It is simply indescribable. There are variegated birds cooing all round. The river Mandakini is flowing down below and is looking like a silver streak. The audible rumbling noise of the flowing river from down below. The great summits clad with snow all round and glistening bright and lustrous and colourful. Even if I had thousands of tongues, I would not have been able to narrate all that I saw. It is such a beautiful creation of the Lord.

### *The trees the Mother tended*

This was verily the realm of Mahamaya, strange and beautiful. Here possibly, were the very trees which She had planted initially and nurtured with care. A shiver went through me. It almost pierced my heart and exquisite feelings welled out from my heart. I had seen such colourful clusters of trees and bunches of

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flowers at a number of places in the Himalayas but was never so much overwhelmed as at this place. After all, an insignificant seed breaks through the earth and grows into a plant and into a tree. Never had such a sight of trees stirred me before. Never had I seen such beautiful groves anywhere. As I climbed up my way to the temple of Kedarnath, I realised that this was all due to fact that this place was sanctified by the severe penance performed here by the Mother of the universe — the daughter of the Himalayas, the King of Mountains. These trees here were the first-borns of the Mother. Even before the birth of Kumara Kartikeya, Mother had reared up these plants. They were, therefore, dearer to Her. She brought them up most lovingly and with Her divine love and affection they became almost immortal. They are standing over there even now, offering heaps of flowers and obeisance to the Mother. These trees revive in our minds the age-old events when the Mother tended the young saplings.

### *Ramwadachatti*

I was musing thus and walking leisurely. I covered a distance of about 4 kosas (6 km) and reached a chatti called Ramwada. There are no built up houses here as there are in Gaurikund. There are a few improvised huts, stones piled and covered with sheaves of grass. Those pilgrims who cannot stay at Kedarnath even for a single night because of the severe cold, come down here and stay in these huts. There are a few shops where pilgrims may purchase their necessaries. As this is a most temporary resort — say for a night — the shops do not have enough provisions. People from plains find it hard to stay here even for a night. Ramwada is the last chatti on the way to Kedarnath. The temple is about 3 kosas (5 km) from here. In the cold season, it snows here heavily. All the huts get covered with thick layers of snow. That is why big houses are not built

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here. Even a well built house soon collapses under the pressure of heaps of snow. Only people from this region can stay on here with their scanty warm clothing but with a bundle of firewood. If the people from the plains are able to stay here for more than one night, they feel highly satisfied and deem this feat a fruition of their penance.

I did not take rest at this chatti. I just entered in and came out. I was anxious to reach Kedarnath. I was, as if, being dragged up there. I had seen so many lovely sights as I entered the domain of Kedarnath—how great and wonderful might be His very abode! I started imagining how I would be transported with joy at the sight of the holy temple. I thought that perhaps I might lose outer consciousness at the divine sight or possibly my body would drop down out of sheer uncontainable joy. I was thrilled. I left Ramwada and hastened towards Kedarnath. As I went beyond Ramwada Chatti, I marked a considerable change in the surroundings. Hithertofore I had been seeing the deep forest rising steadily along with the rising heights of the Himalayas. As I left Gaurikund behind, this fabric of trees on the person of the mountain was becoming thin. The sal and deodar were becoming fewer and fewer as I was going up. These trees were not to be seen any more. Now there were ranges of huge insurmountable mountains bare of trees rising high before me. Only the gurgling sound of the rushing water was audible. When I glanced around I noticed a ring of clouds surrounding the high peaks before me. It resembled a belt on the waist line of the Himalayas.

### *The Paradox*

I could view this girdle from down below the peak of Kedarnath. As I looked down on the lower peaks, I noticed that they were being drenched by heavy showers. I was surprised to see these two opposite phenomena

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around me. The one end of the range was under heavy rains while the other was reflecting the bright rays of the Sun. A portion of the mountainous range was being washed with the cool waters of the springs. At other places the rocks protruded breaking through heavy sheets of snow. The wind blowing from below brought with it the fragrance of various flowers as also the sweet notes of the cooing birds. Darkness hung over certain ravines even during broad day. Some were however, glistening brightly even during night when covered by the soft rays of the moon. All these mighty peaks were arousing in me a conflux of varied feelings. I could notice that all the six seasons existed simultaneously on certain peaks. I also could notice that the same peaks would at times look calm as if in deep meditation. I felt that the uncontaminated Brahman has perhaps assumed the form of this huge snow-white mountain and has opened the gates of divine knowledge for man, the knower. How else could a man with limited intellect understand the infinite Brahman?

Be it as it may. I got lost in the clouds as I climbed up. I said to myself, "What height I have reached!" I left behind even those heaps of clouds hanging around me. Now that the air was thin, I breathed hard. Then again I saw that all the clouds which were hanging heavily were shattered and water was oozing from them on the sides of the huge mountain. There was occasional lightning and the bright streaks of light were as if breaking the moist and sportive clouds into pieces. These pieces were now hanging on anyhow on the sides of the big mountain. There were other clouds which were going round the peaks as if in a worshipful attitude. It appeared to me that the entire series of clouds was harnessed in the service of the Lord of the mountains. The clouds were washing the feet of the rising mountain or were at places watering the natural gardens of the Lord. They

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were thus justifying their name *Jalada* — the bestower of waters. Some clouds, as it were, could not gauge the greatness of the Himalayas. They were somewhat embarrassed and were now hiding in caves. They were as if performing penance and were now in deep *Samadhi*. Or perhaps they knew that the ancient sages are meditating in the caves and therefore, they were standing as sentinels at the entrances of those caves. I further imagined that the great mountain had used the dense forest as his lower garment and as for the upper garment he was using soft muslin in the form of translucent clouds. The intermittent lightning was revealing the richness of this fabric which was laced with gold.

### *Propitious Ashadha*

I was following this route to Kedarnath from Rudraprayag. The Mandakini was flowing at times on my left and sometimes on the right. It was however continuously on my right side since I left Ramwada. I was ascending a narrow path covered with soft snow. Although I had no shoes, I did not feel any discomfort. As far as I remember, I reached Kedarnath by the middle of Ashadha (July). That is why I had not to plod through deep snow. Those who come here early in Jyeshtha (May), that is at the beginning of the pilgrimage season, can see the Mandakini almost in a frozen state. The snow also is deep then. It is not so in Ashadha. By the middle of Ashadha, the route is almost clear. Every year, during winter, there is usually a heavy snowfall and the snow freezes into big rocks. The route to the temple becomes almost blocked at many places. During the summer, these rocks of snow begin to melt and by the beginning of the rainy season, it is all water everywhere. The Mandakini is in spate then. The proper time to be at Kedarnath is from the end of Ashadha i.e. (July) to the end of Sravana (August). The temple

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route is clear during this period. The surroundings are also at their best in their natural scenic beauty. Those who hasten to complete the pilgrimage to Badri and Kedarnath for fear of rains later cannot enjoy the scenic beauty and grandeur observable during these days. In the mid-rainy season, the cold is not very severe and the entire locale of trees and plants bursts with flowers. It is customary to stay for the entire month of Sravana (August) in the vicinity of Kedarnath. This is because the surroundings at Kedarnath are best during this period.

Be that as it may. Now I had entered the holy and the beautiful realm of Kedarnath. This was really a unique region. It is beyond my capacity to describe this place. I had seen Kedarnath with my own eyes and was extremely enraptured. I would request those who desire the same joy to visit this place once in their lifetime.

### *Difficult to sketch*

I am aware that whatever I have written hitherto-fore is but a very meagre description of that celestial place. My memory is now faded and I unable to recall this place in greater detail and describe it critically. I do not also have enough mastery over the language and so I cannot do justice to this place in my description. I shall not feel satisfied, howsoever much I may try. The reader will not be able to form any idea of the supreme ethereal beauty of this place. I had travelled there years ago. To describe the place now at such a distant date, I should have paid another visit to that place, so that I would have been able to describe it more accurately. Readers would have been benefited thereby. If one freshly sees a thing, which is of no consequence or which one does not deem as of any importance, then one does not remember it for long. It fails to make any mark on one's memory. It recedes into oblivion. But I am

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trying to bring before my eyes the very holy place I visited years ago. I have nothing with me now except the failing memory. It is true that once I was possessed by this divine place. I want to bring back those sweet moments and enjoy them. Even if every other thing in this world is lost in oblivion, the glorious Himalaya will always burnish brightly before me. I want to just give a glimpse of this vision to my readers. I am, therefore, straining myself to remember every minute detail of my journey. I have already narrated my difficulties in the beginning of this endeavour. I am feeling much embarrassed as I find that I have not been able to do justice to that extremely holy and beautiful place.

### *At the feet of Kedarnath*

Enough of this digression now. When I first saw the entirely snow clad, huge and bright peak on which the temple of Kedarnath is situated, I was stupefied. I had been walking fast hithertofore, but now my pace slowed. I was charmed as it were and could lift my steps only with great difficulty. The temple of Kedarnath was on the lap of a huge peak and the entire peak was now revealing itself before me. It was as bright as the glowing morning Sun. Thousands of soft rays were emerging from the peak and they were all enveloping and overwhelming me. I thought to myself that I had come to this place of eternal light leaving the eternal darkness permanently behind. I could not look at the snow-white peak for long. My eyes became indrawn and the huge peak of the mountain appeared before me as an eternal uncreated symbol of Siva. This was no imagination. It was a divine experience. Nowhere else in the entire Himalayas you can see such a resplendent form of Siva. I have moved in the Uttarakhand and have visited the extrememely inaccessible places and yet none of them surpasses the holy Kedarnath. Kedarnath is very similar to Kailasa. It cannot be compared with any other place.

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As I have already narrated I did not feel the presence of the Himalayas before reaching Kedarnath. I cannot describe my sublime feelings at the sight of this place where Hara and Gauri met. I was as if embracing the Himalayas and was jostling at His side. Oh, the joy of it! I had been to Jamnotri and also to Gangotri. But nowhere I saw such a vision. To have such a vision is a great event in one's life. One cannot get it, by visiting a few pilgrim spots in this region. One realises this when one visits Kedarnath. Himalayas do not reveal themselves unless one spends a number of days here and visits all the inaccessible beautiful places. All my ideas about the Himalayas changed when I reached Kedarnath. Himalayas are beyond human conception. Himalayas were larger and far greater than I imagined. As I reached the feet of Kedarnath I realised this. Here I came to know that this great mountain is the receptacle of all those innumerable attributes which are unknown to humanity. Who would be able to count the innumerable places which are hidden in the Himalayas? It is quite proper that man should be unable to fathom the depth of the greatness of a place where Gauri meets Hara or rather Prakrti meets Purusha. I was richly enveloped with happy feelings as I mused on the glory of this place. There is no end to the manifestations of Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. Similarly, there was, I thought no end to the glory of the King of the Mountains. He was appearing differently glorious every time I looked at him. I was becoming now more and more anxious to enter into his inner core and enjoy the surpassingly beautiful vistas. I thought that I should not be required to return again to the tumultuous, restless, over-populated, terrible world. I thought of merging permanently here into the very magnificence of this divine mountain. No happiness could have been greater.

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*The Towering Glory*

I was looking at the huge and enormous peaks of Kedarnath. It appeared to me that these lofty peaks are but the sharp teeth of a mighty wheel and that they are cutting asunder, as with a sharp instrument, this earth encircled by oceans. Now that they have done their job, the peaks are proclaiming this event to the heavens. Or rather these white lofty peaks have created a divine domain of their own in the space between the earth and heaven. I cannot say whether such a wonderful view is visible on the earth or in heaven. The temple of Kedarnath is situated on the lap of a tall peak all covered with snow. Under the rays of the summer sun, the snow melts at places and the rocks that lie open, assume the hue of molten gold. The entire mountain appears as if studded with diamonds, emeralds, topaz and what not.

I had lost myself at the sight of the lofty snow clad mountain rock of Kedarnath. I, therefore, did not notice the surroundings. I did not know where I had been sitting all along. I had lost my 'I'ness as it were. It is indeed almost impossible to put down in words how I was feeling. I thought that I had seen whatever there was to be seen anywhere. After a while I regained my consciousness and I found myself seated on a carpet of fresh fragrant flowers. All the surrounding area was covered with beds of flowers. I was intently looking at this beautiful natural surroundings. I was almost looking like a king seated on a rich throne bedecked with precious jewels. It was indeed an indescribable situation.

*Handsome Siva and the Viswarupa*

This beautiful flowery throne was created by all-powerful Mahamaya for the use of Her beloved Siva. Siva left His residence in the cremation ground and His posture of a dead body (Savasana) and condescended to

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come here and adorn this throne. Siva who has renounced everything is the Lord of supreme glory here. The most beloved daughter of Himalaya and Menaka is His consort, and She has made this place so glorious that none may denounce Siva for His poverty. The skill of the Mother of the Universe is seen in all the things which are found here. It was by Her will that Siva reached such glorious heights. All His greatness and grandeur originate from Her. Gauri, who had undergone severe penance, made Siva discard His unusual adornments and made Him wear such fine natural decoration. Glory to Parvati! Her single glance made Siva so much attached to Her that He forgot His own austerities and took up residence in this celestial land. He is ruling the entire universe from this spot.

I was now present at one of the supernal spots on this earth. The King of the Mountains was unfolding his glory before me and I was viewing it with a peace-filled mind. I painfully realised that while I had been viewing the Himalayas so far my eyes never penetrated the outer crust. But now I was in his lap and amazed by his glory. I remembered Arjuna standing stupefied before Sri Krishna showing him His all comprehensive form (Viswa Rupa). Himalaya really appears here as a symbol of the great God — the Master of the Universe. I was almost convinced that the same universal Spirit, which is beyond the comprehension of human senses, which controls every thing in the universe and which resides in the core of every being, has manifested Itself in this huge form. How else could a man, with his limited intelligence and cloudy vision, have a glimpse of the divine? This was all due to His compassion. Long ago, Lord Krishna, out of deep compassion and love for Arjuna, had assumed the all-comprehensive form on the battle-field of Kurukshetra, to remove the clouds of ignorance from his vision and make him strong enough to discrimi-

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nate and perform his duty dispassionately. Now I was before the same divinity in the huge snow-white form—the divinity, so subtle and yet all-powerful and eternal. When we bow before the clay image of the Mother, we become aware of Her subtle and all-pervading form. Similarly, the snow clad mountain spreading before me from east to west reminded me of the eternal Brahman. Verily, this was the supreme bliss (Bhumananda) in a concealed form.

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## GLOSSARY

*Akshaya Tritiya* : an auspicious day supposed to be the beginning of Satya Yuga.

*Apara Vidya* : knowledge about the material world.

*Ashadha* : the third month of the Bengali calendar, the beginning of the rainy season.

*Baisakh* : the first month of the Bengali calendar.

*Bhiksha* : collection of daily food by a sadhu.

*Chakora* : a bird which takes delight in moonlight.

*Champaka* : a golden yellow fragrant flower with long petals.

*Chapati* : a thin bread made of wheat flour.

*Charan* : a ministrel singing the glory of God, country or kings.

*Chatti* : a spacious room where travellers take rest on their way to pilgrimage.

*Dana* : the act of giving, specially to the poor and needy.

*Dakshayani Sati* : the daughter of Daksha, who in her next birth became Parvati, the consort of Shiva again.

*Darshan* : seeing a deity or a sage.

*Dashahara* : Jyeshtha Shukla 10.—The day on which the Ganga is supposed to have descended on the earth. The devout Hindus believe that a dip in the Ganga on this day washes away sins committed in ten lives.

*Dashanami* : the ten orders of monks started by Shankaracharya. The '*Nagas*' belong to an order to protect them.

*Dharmashala* : a place donated by kings and merchants where pilgrims may stay.

*Dhuni* : a temporary fire-place improvised by a sadhu.

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| *Gandharva* | : | a mythical being who is an expert singer, supposed to be living in the middle heights of the Himalayas. |
| *Gayatri Japam* | : | repetition of the famous sacred mantra of the Rigveda. |
| *Gharwari Gosai* | : | sadhus of Dashanami order settling down in the Himalayas and managing the temples there. |
| *Jiva* | : | an individual soul. |
| *Kartika* | : | the seventh month of the Bengali calendar. |
| *Kinnar* | : | a mythical being like *gandharva*, fond of music and dance. |
| *Krosa* | : | a measure of distance — approximately 2 kms. |
| *Lingam* | : | symbolic image of Shiva. |
| *Magha* | : | the tenth month of Bengali calendar (winter). |
| *Margashirsha* | : | (Agrahayana) — the eighth month of the Bengali calendar. |
| *Math* | : | a monastery. |
| *Mohanta* | : | a head of a monastery. |
| *Panda* | : | a guide and a priest at a place of pilgrimage. |
| *Para Vidya* | : | the knowledge of spiritual reality. |
| *Patwari* | : | a petty officer who keeps a village record. |
| *Prasad* | : | sacramental food. |
| *Pujari* | : | a priest of a temple. |
| *Purascharana* | : | a spiritual process to awaken a mantra. |
| *Roti* | : | a coarse bread. |
| *Shamaka* | : | a kind of grain grown in the hills. |
| *Siddha* | : | one perfect or successful in his spiritual life. |
| *Tapasya* | : | spiritual practice. |

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*Uttara Khanda* : Northern districts of the Himalayas, starting from Rishikesh and leading to the holy pilgrim spots in the interior.

*Vaishnava* : devotees and worshippers of Vishnu.

*Yaksha* : a mythical being.

*Yantra* : a mystical figure used in Tantra for worshipping a deity.

*Yuga* : one of the four epochs: Satya, Treta, Dvapara and Kali.

*Zangora* : a kind of grain grown in the hills.

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